

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

2013 BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE



JOHN SHIRLEY

NEW STORY & INTERVIEW

LAVIE TIDHAR
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TIM LEES
JASON SANFORD
SARAH BROOKS
NEW STORIES

DAVID LANGFORD'S
ANSIBLE LINK
NEWS

NICK LOWE'S
MUTANT POPCORN
TONY LEE'S
LASER FODDER
FILMS

BOOK ZONE
JONATHAN MCCALMONT'S
FUTURE INTERRUPTED
BOOKS



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INTERZONE WINS A BRITISH FANTASY AWARD!

On November 3rd at the World Fantasy Convention in Brighton *Interzone* received the British Fantasy Award for Best Magazine. This was a very pleasant surprise! Many thanks to everybody who voted us onto the shortlist, to the judges who then made the final decision, and to every one of *Interzone's* contributors for providing us with such high quality work.

A few contributors to *Interzone* and other TTA publications appeared on various British Fantasy Award shortlists: Stephen Volk for his *Black Static* column *Coffinmaker's Blues*, Nina Allan for her *Black Static* story 'Sunshine', Mike O'Driscoll for his TTA Novella *Eyepennies*, Ben Baldwin for his artwork here and elsewhere, and a gobsmacked Ray Cluley to whom Ramsey Campbell handed the Best Short Story award for 'Shark! Shark!' (*Black Static* #29). You'll know Ray from his appearances in *Interzone*, but he's a more regular contributor to *Black Static* with a story in the current issue, and another in the latest volume of our genre-bending *Crimewave* anthology series. Congratulations to Ray and all the other winners, listed by Dave Langford in this issue's *Ansible Link*.

READERS' POLL

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed in *Interzone* over this past year. You may vote for and against any number of stories published in issues #244 to #249 inclusive. You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote. Martin McGrath will be overseeing the poll as usual, and there are two ways you can send him your votes: by email to interzonepoll@ttapress.com, or via the form on ttapress.com/interzone/readerspoll/. We're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think. The results will be published in issue #252, so please make sure your votes are in before March 31st.

ANOTHER DELAY FOR OVERSEAS SUBSCRIBERS

We must apologise for the length of time it took issue #249 to reach overseas subscribers, approaching six weeks to some destinations instead of the six days it should have taken. We've been assured that it *won't happen again* but please continue to let us know when your copy arrives, or when it doesn't, so we can keep trying to improve this erratic service.

ONLINE SUBMISSIONS

At long last we have set up a proper system for receiving and responding to online submissions of short stories. Please read the updated guidelines on our website and follow the link there. You'll need to set up an account but it's free and will enable you to log in any time to check on progress of submissions. As always, we're looking forward to hearing from you!

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Submissions

Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome, but please follow the contributors' guidelines on the website. We now accept online submissions.



COVER ART: XIANTH BY JIM BURNS

prints are available: contact the artist via his website at www.alisoneldred.com/artistJimBurns.html



JOHN SHIRLEY: THREE STEPS FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK
interview conducted by Andy Hedgecock

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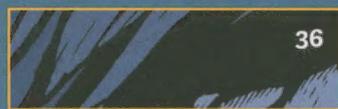
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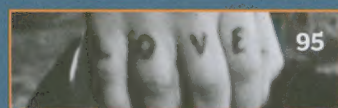
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Sir Ben Kingsley says the *Ender's Game* film (he plays Mazer Rackham) has transcendent qualities which mere sf fans won't appreciate: 'I think there's a much bigger audience than just your science fiction fans – we'll get them as well – but we'll also get people who want a philosophical journey, that journey of spirit through the film.' (Getreading.co.uk)

Awards presented at the 2013 World Fantasy Convention. *British Fantasy*. Fantasy Novel: Graham Joyce, *Some Kind of Fairy Tale*. Horror Novel: Adam Nevill, *Last Days*. Novella: John Llewellyn Probert, 'The Nine Deaths of Dr Valentine'. Short: Ray Cluley, 'Shark! Shark!' (*Black Static* #29). Collection: Robert Shearman, *Remember Why You Fear Me*. Anthology: Jonathan Oliver, ed., *Magic*. Small Press: ChiZine Publications. Nonfiction: Pornokitsch. Magazine: *Interzone*. Artist: Sean Phillips. Comic/Graphic Novel: Brian K. Vaughan & Fiona Staples, *Saga*. Screenplay: *The Cabin in the Woods*. Newcomer: Helen Marshall for *Hair Side, Flesh Side*. Special: Iain Banks. • **Gemmell** (heroic fantasy). Novel: Brent Weeks, *The Blinding Knife*. Debut Novel: John Gwynne, *Malice*. Cover Art: Didier Graffet & Dave Senior for Joe Abercrombie's *Red Country*. • **World Fantasy**. Novel: G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen*. Novella: K.J. Parker, 'Let Maps to Others' (*Subterranean*). Short: Gregory Norman Bossert, 'The Telling' (*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*). Anthology: Danel Olson, ed., *Postscripts* #28/#29. Collection: Joel Lane, *Where Furnaces Burn*. Artist: Vincent Chong. Special Professional: Lucia Graves, translation of *The Prisoner of Heaven* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón. Special Non-Professional: S.T. Joshi, *Unutterable Horror*.

The Analogizer™. 'If Lord Justice Leveson is the Voldemort of press freedom, then I guess that makes the editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre, Harry Potter.' (Fearlessly outspoken *Daily Mail* columnist Sarah Vine on BBC Radio 4 *What the Papers Say*)

Robert Silverberg, in London en route to the World Fantasy Convention, had a heart attack on 29 October. Treatment went well, with a stent inserted and discharge from hospital after only two days; but sadly he had to skip the convention.

Richard Dawkins missed out on a Hugo nomination, according to the retired Pope Benedict XVI, who in a recently published letter declares: '*The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins is a classic example of science fiction.' (*Independent*)

Jennifer Ridyard explicates: 'I guess sometimes they just call the science fiction that girls love "fantasy", because girls tend to shy away from the tacky sci-fi label.' (*Guardian*)

The Weakest Link. *Dan O'Connell*: 'How many dwarfs were there in the Snow White story?' *Caller*: 'Ten.' (XFM) • **Halloween** dialogue. *Richard Bacon*: 'Is there a ghost story you would recommend for children under 11?' *Susan Hill*: 'Anything by M.R. James.' *RB*: 'Oh, she's great.' *SH*: 'She is a he.' *RB*: 'I did not know that.' (Radio 5 Live)

Vin Diesel may need a quick reality check. *Time*: 'You fight some scary aliens in *Riddick*. Are there any creatures that you're scared of in real life?' *Diesel*: 'Huh. Uh...dinosaurs?' *Time*: 'I meant

creatures that actually exist now.' *Diesel*: 'I would say King Kong, but I'm not really scared of King Kong. That would be inaccurate.' (*Time* interview)

David Birnbaum, US jeweller turned philosopher, solves the mysteries of the universe in his self-published *Summa Metaphysica* ('The cosmic trajectory is from the bottomless VOID to the limitless EXTRAORDINARY'). According to a comment at the *US Chronicle of Higher Education* website, this 'reads like L Ron Hubbard had drunken sex one night with Ayn Rand and produced this bastard thought-child'. (*Guardian*)

Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five was cleared by the *Sunday Times* literary tribunal of any horrid genre taint: 'The cultish Vonnegut's part memoir, part study of psychosis and escape is not the sci-fi it's often dismissed as.'

Thog's Masterclass. *Hostage to Fortune Dept*. 'And then, as if written by the hand of a bad novelist, an incredible thing happened.' (Jonathan Stroud, *The Amulet of Samarkand*, 2003) • **Joy of Anatomy**. 'The hole was off-centre, so the end of the belt projected upwards and then dangled down again under its own weight, like a failed erection.' (Anne Holt, *Blind Goddess*, 1993; trans Tom Geddes 2012) • **Dept of Bilocation**. 'A single walnut door stood either end of the long, grand hallway.' (R.S. Johnson, *The Genesis Project: The Children of CS-13*, 2011) • **Secrets of Elegant Sentence Construction**. 'But Zuberi did not see this, nor did anyone else, and as he slid his pistol back into its holster, the main door to



the room flew open and about a dozen men and women, who had been sleeping only moments earlier, poured in, their weapons held and ready to fight if need be, a few more arrived soon after.' (*Ibid*) • *Multiple Messianic Mot Juste Dept*. 'The look of Polish had begun finally to fit his eye-sockets without estrangement...' 'A moan: or not exactly a moan. Rather, the sound of indecipherable syllables evaporating at the bottom of the

sea.' 'Lars, looking with all his strength, felt his own ordinary [eye] pupil consumed by a conflagration in the socket. As if copulating with an angel whose wings were on fire.' 'Dr. Eklund, meanwhile, was nodding his big face up and down, cheering her on like a human baton.' 'One idea remained like an exclamation mark in the sweet-tasting pink wax of their heads: the stewpot, the stewpot!' (all Cynthia Ozick,

The Messiah of Stockholm, 1987) • *Neat Tricks Dept*. 'A gang of priests gathered around Cushing's old white head, kissing his ass.' (John Flood, *Bag Men*, 1997) • *Dept of Eyebrow Motility*. "'Things here are just hopping,'" he told me, his eyebrows flying all over his narrow face.' [A different chap:] 'His eyebrows were winging around his face in interrogation.' (both Charlaïne Harris, *Real Murders*, 1990)

R.I.P.

Patricia Anthony (1947–2013), US author whose 1987 story debut was followed by seven idiosyncratic novels from the sf *Cold Allies* (1998) to the World War I slipstream fantasy *Flanders* (1998), was reported on 2 August as having died; she was 66.

Martha Bartter (1932–2013), US critic, editor and author of some short sf whose major work was *The Way to Ground Zero: The Atomic Bomb in American Science Fiction* (1988), died on 18 June aged 80.

Gary Brandner (1933–2013), US horror/thriller author best known for his werewolf novel *The Howling* (1977), its two sequels and the film franchise it spawned, died on 23 September; he was 80.

Tom Clancy (1947–2013), bestselling US author of spy technothrillers, died on 1 October; he was 66. His 'Jack Ryan' sequence enters near-future sf territory with nuclear terrorism in *The Sum of All Fears* (1991; filmed 2002), war with a nuclear-armed Japan in *Debt of Honor* (1994), and further doomsday scenarios.

Ann C. Crispin (1950–2013), US author made Grandmaster by the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers for her *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *V* etc franchise novels, died on 6 September aged 63. Solo work includes the sf *StarBridge* sequence; she co-founded the essential scam-alert service *Writer Beware*.

Anthony Hinds (1922–2013), UK film producer and (as John Elder) scriptwriter who created the X-rated Hammer Horror film phenomenon, died on 30 September aged 91. His first productions in this vein were *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955) and *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1956).

William Harrison (1933–2013), US author and screenwriter who adapted his 1973 'Roller Ball Murder' – title story of his 1974 collection – for the film *Rollerball* (1975; remade 2002), died on 22 October; he was 79.

Stanley Kauffmann (1916–2013), US critic, author, editor and film reviewer who while at Ballantine Books acquired Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, died on 9 October aged 97.

Dot (Dorothy) Lumley, UK agent who ran the Dorian Literary Agency and represented various genre authors including former husband Brian Lumley, died on 5 October. Earlier, as Dot Houghton, she was a publisher's editor at NEL and Methuen.

Nick Robinson, UK editor/publisher who founded Robinson Publishing in 1983 and chaired Constable & Robinson (merged 1999) from 2009, died on 30 August aged 58. He published many genre anthologies including the Mammoth Books titles edited by Mike Ashley, Stephen Jones and others, and UK editions of Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best SF*.

Leland Sapiro (1924–2013) US fan who edited the thrice-Hugo-nominated academic fanzine *Riverside Quarterly* (formerly *Inside*, with others) from 1962 to 1993, died on 8 October aged 89.

Takashi Yanase (1919–2013), Japanese manga writer/ animator famed for his widely franchised superhero Anpanman (whose replaceable head – sometimes fed to the needy – is an anpan, a bun stuffed with red bean paste), died on 13 October. He was 94.

TIM LEES UNKNOWN CITIES OF AMERICA

illustrated by Richard Wagner





EXIT 239

NAGOSHA 

“**H**e can say ‘bananas.’ Go on, boy – say it. Say it, boy.”
 “Bananas,” says the dog.

Everyone laughs. Even the dog looks pleased. A big man in a baseball cap says, “Go again?” and cracks a peanut shell between his teeth.

“Ba-na-nanas,” says the dog. It has a squishy, not-quite-human voice, like a slowed-down Donald Duck. I don’t know what kind of a dog it is. A terrier or pug cross, maybe. The old geezer who owns it puffs his chest out, rocks from foot to foot, and puts his nose up in the air. A long white braid hangs down his back.

“Say other stuff?” asks someone in the crowd.

“Oh, sure.”

“Go on,” they say. “Let’s hear.”

“He can say – ” The old man chuckles wick-edly. “Pardon, ladies. He can say ‘Fuck the Dem-ocrats.’”

“Let’s hear, let’s hear!”

“Come on, boy. Say it. You say ‘Fuck the Dem-ocrats.’ You say it, boy.”

“Bananas,” says the dog again. It looks up at its master with a puzzled, half-expectant air.

“No boy. Not ‘bananas.’ ‘Fuck the Democrats.’ You say it now.”

“Bananas,” says the dog.

“*Alright!*” The old man claps his hands. “Y’all hear that?”

“Yeah,” says the big guy, spitting shells into his fist. “Kinda...yeah. I think.”

“I heard it,” says his wife.

“I heard it too,” says someone else.

The old man stoops and pets the dog. “Clever, clever boy!” He takes a treat and flips it to the animal, which gulps it down, looking for more.

Here miracles can happen every day; here signs and wonders are expected of the world. The old man’s crowd drifts off. The little dog jumps up at him. “Bananas,” it keeps saying, scrunching up the word as if its jaws are mashed with gum. I call the guy aside, then take the photo from my wallet, show him.

“Seen this woman?”

He squints, running a hand over his head. A small, pink tongue peeks through his teeth. He frowns.

“Show it the dog,” he says at last, and so I do.

You can guess the dog’s reply.

It was a night flight, Denver to Newark, three hours twenty; I was ten years old. I slept a while, and when I woke, the land beneath was blotched with light, the yellow spattered on the black like floating galaxies, and I thought of all the lives going on right below me, right that second, all the people there I’d never meet or see or know about. I tried to pick out shapes, put names to things, familiarise the stuff I saw: a ballpark or a shopping mall, a freeway or a railroad track...

We passed a seven-pointed star, big as – what? Manhattan? Something like that, anyway. Dark in the middle, dark all round, bright at the edge, a cookie-cutter shape, stencilled in light. I watched it sliding slowly past, and vanish inch by inch behind the window seal. I pressed my face against the glass; but by the time I woke my Mom, it was already gone.

There’s nothing on the map, on any map of any route that we could possibly have taken, and I’ve checked them all a hundred times since then. Yet it was real, I know; real as the lights of Jersey that would sweep towards us in the hours to come.

In those days, I believed what I’d been taught in school, and seen on television. Later, I’d learn other things: a notion of the vastness of America, the limits of cartography; and of the cities, some strange, some almost wholly unremarkable, that don’t show up on maps.

Treetops, Arizona, has been named ironically: there are no trees, not one, although the man I meet, standing at the crossroads, is so tall and massive that he’s like a tree himself. He doesn’t move. A broad hat shades his face. He leans both hands upon an aluminium cane. The hands are very large, twisted like roots.

“Sir. If you can help me please.”

I show the picture. I say, “She’s got a tattoo of an owl – here,” and I touch my shoulder blade.

He turns his head, shying away, as if the picture hurts his eyes.

“Sir. If you’d take a look. Please.”

He’s squeamish, like a child. I’m sure he knows. But he just shakes his head, his lips twitch, and he swivels on his stick and struts off stiffly down the street, away from me. I stand there with the sun upon my face, my hands, feeling the sweat run drip, drip down my back, and let him go.

You learn to pick them out. The ones who know, or might know, and the ones who've brushed against it without ever understanding what they've seen.

It's not a country. That's the thing. This place we live. It's not a country and it never was, nor even an idea. Only a long sequence of statutes, ordinances, a map cut up, split into colours, states...stars on a flag.

The map was wrong. The map was ink on paper; the stars, stitched cloth.

America was something more.

I've travelled now for years, back and forth, picking up traces, here and there, anywhere I can: Ohio, Texas, Oregon...

There was a name she'd used. I'd asked her where she came from and she'd said, "Nagoshia." "Where?" I'd said. "I'm never going back," she said, like she was answering the question. And that's all she'd tell me for a time.

I'd met her in a bar down Richmond way. She picked me up, to tell the truth, though she was cool about it, didn't come on desperate or brassy or like that. And she was nice. She was. She had a broad, strong, freckled face – a farm-girl's face, I thought – and cropped blonde hair, cow-licked and gelled. She wasn't really dressed up for a night out on the town. Sweater, jeans, cerise cloth jacket. Duffle bag dumped at her feet. We sat across a table, yelling over sports news and the juke box tunes.

"You're different," she said then, and took my hand.

"Well, thank you."

"Me – I'm different, too."

"I see that."

But she didn't smile, just leaned up close and talked into my ear: "I need to get somewhere."

"Hey. Say the word."

I was flippant still. She wasn't.

"Look," she said. "You seem a nice guy. This is a lot to ask. Don't want, that's fine. You know?"

I felt her interest slip, said quickly, "Sure, I'll do it. Tell me where."

She sank her drink and she was heading for the door. I set my glass down, followed.

In the car I said again, "Where?"

"Somewhere. Anywhere." She hunched down in the seat like she was scared of being seen.

"Don't matter where..."

We Motel 6'd that night. One room, twin beds. I turned my back while she undressed. She said, "Look if you want. It's OK."

So I looked because she'd said I could, which made it sort of clinical, like staring at a statue or some other work of art.

"Nice ink," I said.

"My nickname. 'Little Owl.'"

"Native American?"

"Uh-uh." She craned around, trying to see the delicate cartoon sketched on her skin. The muscles in her neck stood out, long and powerful. "My folks...I guess they took from everywhere, you know? Some Christian, some Eastern, some Hopi, some...yeah. All that."

"OK."

"They had this...you know. Kind of free love thing."

She let that hang a while. "Sounds fun," I said.

She pulled the sheet back and her body slid in cold beside me.

"No. Not fun. Not anything. Just how it was, you know? Just how."

North, then. A look-out point over the Hudson, the water down below like sheet steel, rain just hanging in the air, about to fall...

"His name's the Turk," she said. "He's like their go-fetch, see? Someone moves away, they want them bringing back, he brings. You get it now?"

I didn't move. I stared across the river and the wind pulled at my hair and her arm was linked in tight to mine. I said, "You're telling me...?"

"I saw him once. I think I saw him, anyhow. Not here. A few weeks back. Before I met you. That's why, you know. That's why I had to leave. That's why..."

She was crying, shivers running through her chest, her shoulders. I looked down, wiped her cheeks clean with my thumb. She pushed against me, but she kept on shaking, and the tears came back, and nothing I could do or say would stop them.

I walked her to the car. Soon the rain began, and as we drove the landscape melted into shades of grey, and the downpour wrapped around us like a screen, and for a short while she

was calm again.

There was a place the freeways met, looping over one another in great concrete arcs; and the town had grown up underneath and all about, and taken on some of the harshness of the concrete and the stink of smoke and gasoline.

A junkyard town. A salvage town. A town where no-one chose to stop, but people stopped there anyway: maybe a detour sign, big letters, **THIS WAY**, and nothing up ahead but blackness and the barrel of a gun; or else the roar of engines, and a fleet of humvees, bikes and souped-up trucks, all swooping down like wolves to fasten on some poor lone traveller, then hem him in and herd him, out into the darkness on the highway's edge...

Not everybody vanished. Not for good. Some made it back on foot, alone, no car, no goods, no money or ID, wandering for miles until at last, by accident far more than anything, they'd come upon familiar roads; then sit there in the sheriff's office, trying to explain, to tell him where they'd been, not even clear about the place's name; facing the blank looks of the sheriff and the clerk, till someone has the wit to bring a map. "**Alright!**" exclaims the traveller, and rubs his hands. He knows exactly where it has to be. He knows just where he was. He checks the route, that last town that he went through, that last sign he saw... He plots his course. And then, and then...

Then nothing. Nought and nix and *nada*. No place where the highways meet, no town below... The roads marked on the map don't even touch. And yet he knows it's close, it has to be. He calculates, works out the mileage, landmarks, anything that comes to mind. "It's wrong," he says. "Your map's all wrong." And the sheriff gives a warning about wasting county time, and maybe says, "You shouldn't smoke that stuff," and wants a blood test; and the town stays hidden. And unless by some incredible bad luck, you've been there, then you'll never, never know.

"Alright," she said. "So JFK gets shot. What car's he in?"

"Is this a joke?"

"What car, hey?"

"Well...presidential limo, I suppose."

"The SS-100-X," she said, faint smile softening her lips. "Which is...what? Brand name?"

But I knew this one from school. "A Lincoln?"

"Right!" she clapped her hands. "And Lincoln died – you tell me how?"

"Hold on, hey? What you saying? It's an omen? Like, he picked a different car, he'd be alive?"

"Maybe."

"Bad luck? Fate? What?"

"A Lincoln Continental. Made by Ford. Lincoln, shot in the Ford Theater. Both men, back of the head. Presence of their wives. Both men – "

She could be funny sometimes. Funny about weird shit, true, but funny, just the same.

Or serious. Or both at once.

"It all fits in," she said. "It's all linked up, you know? From sea to shining sea."

"A butterfly flaps its wings..."

"A butterfly, a president. So what's the diff?"

We kept moving, stopping two, three nights at most, each place we went. By the last night she'd be edgy, checking windows, jumping at a car door slamming in the forecourt, or the wind rattling the trees... And we'd move on.

She talked about the Turk and she'd no humour in her voice at all those times; nothing but fear.

"He's like a hunting dog. He gets your scent, and then – "

"He can't make you go back."

She didn't answer me.

"There's laws," I told her. "You're of age. Means you got rights. Means you're protected."

Her fingers knotted in her lap.

"I know this...friend. Practices law. Chicago. We'll talk to her. She'll help. We'll deal with this."

She said, "Will we?"

Her tone said no, we wouldn't. And we drove in silence then, for many, many miles.

We passed a burger joint, its entrance flanked by two huge dancing pigs, twenty feet tall, garish, piggy-plastic pink. "Did we just see that?" She was laughing, so I turned the car and we went in to eat. Burgers, bacon, fries and shakes. She dabbed a blob of mayo on my nose. "Handsome," she said. I did the same right back. "Cute," I said. And later, as the meal went on, she talked about her past, her childhood.

And Nagosha.

"No property," she said.

"Communist...?"

"Spiritual. Everything in common. Including..."

"Each other?"

She gave a nod. I tried to tell her that it didn't matter, her past wasn't important to me; while in my head, I saw a bunch of grey-haired hippies dancing on a lawn, dressed only in a daisy and a sunflower or two, the burned-out refugees of some past time, dumb and lost yet, in some vague way, still innocent.

Her face said otherwise.

"You're just a kid, you know? A kid. And there's like, stuff all round... None of it's yours. Not your toys, your clothes. Not your favourite doll. Not your crayons and your drawing book. Not your Mom and Dad."

She wasn't eating now. She was staring out the window, at some place no-one else could see.

I'd known that this would come, this conversation, and I'd put it off and put it off. But now I took a breath.

"Was there...you know. Exploitation?"

It seemed a safe word. Neutral. But she scrunched her mouth up, frowned, said, "Sex."

"Was there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, there was sex. Sure. 'Cept you can't exploit if nothing's owned. It can't be done. You know?"

"I don't -"

She said, "Who owns you? Who d'you belong to, huh?"

"No-one," I said, then quickly changed it.

"You! That's who. You, yourself -"

"No property." She pushed her meal away, she pushed the cutlery and condiments away. "Renounce it all. Give everything to God and to the Universe from which it came. Who owns you?"

"You! Still you..."

"Give everything. *Everything*. The way we saw it - *they* saw it - nobody owns. Everything's in common. What you do to one person, you do to everyone. Yourself too. So - can you exploit yourself? That even possible?"

She picked her fork back up, turned it in her hand.

"They're family," she said. "My family. They're

still my family. I'm theirs, they're mine. That's how it goes."

"This Turk guy too."

"Oh yeah. The Turk a whole lot. Right now, him more than all of 'em."

She asked me, "Will you buy me something?"

"Sure."

"For me, and no-one else?"

I put the money in her hand. I paced the forecourt, watching through the gift store window. I couldn't get it all inside my head. Too much to think about, too much to comprehend... She took twenty minutes in there. Came out with a heart-shaped scarlet-coloured ashtray. *STUB IT!!!!* said the label, *The FUN way to quit!!* There was a heat-sensor of some kind in the base, and when you stubbed your smoke, the lights would flash around the rim and tell you *well done*.

She had a little pack of batteries to power the thing.

"You don't smoke," I said. She shrugged. She didn't even take it out the package, just cradled it there in her hands, and smiled.

Driving. Trying to tell her stuff I'd seen on TV, read in magazines, how her body was her own, how she'd a right to say what happened to it, who could touch it and who couldn't. Trying to tell her, give her some perspective. Thinking, this is counselling, a thing you're meant to train for and have letters after your name, long before you go do it for real.

"There's times people don't realise. They think it's all their own fault, like they deserve it, or like...like the other's got a right, you know? It gets all twisted in your head, and sometimes..."

"That's not why I left," she said.

"Looks like a good reason to me."

"You make them sound like monsters, and they're not."

"Well...out here in the real world, I dunno how else you describe them. People who do that."

She was angry. It came quickly: angry and defensive.

"They are *ethical*. They are *moral people*. They're the most moral people I have ever met. And when you're right - when you're *always right* - it doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't

matter! Every possibility is open, it's the ultimate freedom. Everything is right. You understand?"

"Some things," I sounded slow and weak, "some things are never..."

"To the righteous man, all things are righteous."

"What righteous man? What fucking righteous man?"

"The righteous man has power over all. The righteous man –"

"You left."

I wished I was still smoking. I wanted something – a cigarette, a drink. Something to hold in my hand, to take away this glimpse into the abyss.

She said, "I'll tell you why I left. And why I'll always be below them. I will always be unfit for them, because, because..."

And the rage was gone again, as quick as that. Her voice was small, a whisper, underneath the engine noise.

She told me, "Everyone loves everyone. That's it, you know?"

"What they call 'love' –"

"Everyone loves everyone."

"OK," I said, not seeing it.

"So who loves you?"

She beat her hand against her thigh, harder and harder, like trying to distract herself from toothache.

"Who the fuck loves *you*?"

She was bothered by a Buick that she said was following us. Then there was a guy in a convenience store and when we left she saw him make a call. I told her it was nothing, just some guy talking to his wife. No-one could track her here, I said. We were on my cards. Even if they checked, half the time I paid in cash. No way were we traceable, I said, no way on God's green Earth. I tried to reassure her, time and time again, and yet the more I did, the more I started worrying myself, and wondering if maybe she was right.

Wolftrap, Virginia. A name just full of omens. But like JFK, I wasn't listening.

Motel again. There was a sign up warning us to lock the door, even when we were inside. And we did. We always locked the door. Always, always.

It didn't stop him.

I woke up in the dark, pre-dawn. Heart thumping, no idea why. Sat up...and froze.

He stood there at the far end of the bed, just watching me, and it struck me even then as a peculiar thing: I'd pictured him as squat and powerful – that's what the name evoked for me – but he was tall and thin and didn't need the muscle, because he had a handgun pointed at my chest.

To her, he just said, "Up. Get dressed."

He'd pulled the curtains back a foot or two so that the light shone in, letting me see the gun. It was like part of him, the way he held it, easy and yet firm. I saw it and I'd no doubt he could kill me if he chose. My legs began to shake. A tremor swept up through my body. I kicked the sheets.

He told me, "Stay, Fido."

I stayed.

From time to time he'd glance towards her as she dressed. There was a kind of sadness in it, it seemed to me, the manner of a disappointed parent. A hundred crazy schemes went racing round my head – I'd grab the gun or kick him hard, or bribe him, or just talk to him, persuade him to go home and leave us... One mad plan after another. Hero stuff. Movie stuff. The kind of stuff you always hope you'll do when somebody's depending on you, till it finally happens, and you find out that you don't, and for one good reason, too: because if you try it, then you'll die. That's all there is.

He asked her, "What do you need?"

She looked about. She didn't speak. She started picking up her clothes and threw them in her bag. Once she caught my eye, and for a moment I was certain she was going to cry, except she didn't. She took the soft-toy elephant I'd bought her, sort of a joke, and Turk said, "No. Leave that."

He took the iPod from the bedside table, slipped it in his pocket, looked at me.

"Hope you got taste, kid."

The world seemed to have slowed while he was there. Like watching from above, everything sluggish and deliberate, as in a dream. I heard the door click shut. I lay a while, still paralysed, still scared.

Then I was up and out, naked on the walkway,

the rumble of an engine starting, three floors down, a big black Buick backing out...

I dashed back to the room, snatched up my coat, my shoes, my wallet. Couldn't pull the coat on with my shoes in hand and so I dropped them, running barefoot down the stairs the same moment the Buick roared out of the parking lot. Then in my car. Slow. Slow. Everything too slow. Door too slow to shut, engine slow to catch.

I backed out, hearing the wing scrape on the wall. Spinning the wheel, wondering which way to go.

I drove a long time in the dark, and then it was no longer dark. The morning traffic flowed around me, but I didn't stop. I drove for hours. I took the side roads. Cruised the parking garage and the shopping mall. I swung around, went back, retraced my route, then back and back again. On the floorboard of the car the things she'd asked for rolled and clattered every time I took a bend, and I'd kick them out from cluttering the pedals: a salad spinner and a Simpsons coffee mug, a card of rainbow-coloured shoelaces; a perfume bottle and a single track shoe and a lighter shaped like Jesus on the cross... I checked the gas stations, the roadside stores, I'd ask about a big black Buick, only now the sun was pouring down, illuminating and incriminating as I stood there in my long coat with my bare feet and my naked shins, the leg-hairs shining in the summer light.

I never found the Buick or the Turk or her again.

They'd slipped away, to that place where the road signs didn't point, and the cameras were all blind.

.....
In Port Cythera, Florida, a man says, "Girl like that. She's everyone's, she's no-one's. Know what I mean?"

I hit him in the face. We wrestle, falling to the ground. It's crazy. It's ridiculous. I know he doesn't know her and I'm angry and I keep on hitting till he gets on top of me and grabs my hands. He's leaning over me and I can see the spittle gather on his lips, hanging, swinging, just about to fall... He grins. I close my eyes and turn my head.

It's my first real fight since High School. No

surprise I lose. The search goes on. Sometimes I'll find a town so plain, so down-home, so normal in just every way, it's only when I check the map I find out I'm in unrecorded territory. Stop for coffee and a piece of pie. See the landmarks, view the bait shop and the church up on the hill; visit the chocolatier. Drive on. Forget just how far off the map I've been.

In Indiana, south of Marion, you'll find a city like a ribbon mall, a hundred miles in length, that just goes on and on and on.

Or else you won't. Depending how things are.

And me, there's only one name that I'm looking for. One name, painted in big, bold letters, on a sign I've never seen.

Nagosha.

Nagosha, Nagosha, Nagosha.

Sometimes I'll hole up, take a job a few weeks, try to get to know people, and scratch the surface of their lives. Hoping, always hoping. "You hear about a place called...?"

Mostly, though, I travel. I keep her things packed in the trunk, all neatly wrapped in tissue and in boxes and in plastic bags. All the junk and gimcrack shit she wanted, all there, every single piece. I've never thrown a thing away. And one day, when I find her, I'll just nod, and smile, like we were talking only days ago, and then I'll say, "Oh yeah. Think you forgot something," and pop the trunk and see her face go bright and shiny with the joy of it.

"That's yours," I'll say. "I kept it safe for you. It's yours and yours alone, you know?"

I'll look into her eyes. They say that you can tell a person's happiness like that, by measuring the size and blackness of the pupils. And then I'll say again, "OK?" and she won't speak, won't say a word. She'll smile. And go on smiling. And I'll shut the trunk and open up the side door and say, "Where?" and this time, she'll know just exactly where she wants to go.

And I'll get in and drive.

Tim Lees is author of the much-praised novel *Frankenstein's Prescription* (Tartarus Press). He has been a staple of TTA Press for many years. A new story, 'Scenes From Country Life', is in *Crimewave 12: Hurts* (out now!). Tim is British but now lives in Chicago. He occasionally rants at timlees.wordpress.com, and has been known to tweet.

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

Paprika

JASON SANFORD



"AH PAPRIKA, YOU DANCE SO WELL,"

Satoshi exclaimed each bright-sun morning, his praise always pleasing no matter how many times Paprika heard it.

And Paprika could dance, she really could.

Not like some of the olds, who'd spent millennia shaping their locked-down bodies through graceful movements.

But still she could dance.

Ballet. The Twist. Bhangra.



Sometimes she'd make herself as tiny as Satoshi's hand and pirouette for hours on his workbench while he reformed nano into exciting, long-lost toys. Other times she'd dance full-sized – child-sized as Satoshi would say, although Paprika knew to never speak that depressing word to customers. Paprika would create a full-flowing *lehengas* skirt – always the brightest of greens – and she'd dance in the store window, spinning and spinning until she was so overcome with happiness she'd dance through the window into the outside world, leaping and spinning to imaginary partners, bowing and smiling to the boys and girls who never came, flying across the deserted streets and passing in and out of the empty but perfectly preserved buildings surrounding Satoshi's shop.

But whenever any of the few olds left in the city visited, Paprika restrained herself by simply sitting at her table in the window display. Not that she was for sale – Satoshi always made *that* clear to any customer who mistook her for other than what she was. With her young girl's body and innocent happiness, Paprika knew she helped Satoshi sell more than merely the bright toys which populated his store. She sold nostalgia. Happy memories of long-vanished childhoods.

And if nostalgia helped keep Satoshi alive, that was fine with Paprika.

One day an old she'd never seen – which was surprising because there were only a few hundred left in the city – visited the store. The woman's bright red hair shimmered from head to waist and her tight-crafted face was bound in a rigid mask of anger and irritation from who knew how many years of life. Paprika instantly loved the woman's hair and would have spun her own nothing-imagined locks into a perfect imitation. But she didn't want to risk alienating one of their rare customers. So Paprika simply sat quietly at her window table reading one of the ancient paper books she sometimes found in the city's empty buildings.

The woman approached the workshop desk and rang the tiny holographic service bell even though Satoshi stood directly before her.

"May I help you?" Satoshi asked in a calm voice, never one to be angry or irritated no matter how pushy the customer.

The woman held out her upturned palm, which shimmered to a rainbow of colors. Even though Paprika sat at the wrong angle to read the data with her eyes, her core easily interfaced with the stream. The woman's hand contained a notice from Satoshi, telling a customer the train he'd ordered had been created.

"So wonderful," Satoshi said, the glee in his voice almost unheard of among the olds. "I'd worried Mr Tanner might be unable to pick it up. When he ordered the train he was so...well, perhaps excited would be a close-enough word."

Paprika instantly knew something was wrong by the way the woman clenched her youthfully recreated hands, but Satoshi was in the thralls of his imagination and didn't notice. He walked quickly to the other side of the shop, dust and unbonded nanobits flickering in his wake. He stood over the train set Mr Tanner had ordered, a replica of a Lionel 2333 diesel locomotive Paprika had copied from Mr Tanner's few remaining childhood memories. Paprika remembered the glee in Mr Tanner's stiff eyes when he'd described the train, which had already been ancient when Mr Tanner was a young boy.

Satoshi picked up the train. The front of the engine shone bright red, the back a striking silver, and to Paprika it seemed the train could zoom across the universe faster than even light dared dream. She'd been disappointed to learn trains only travelled on their tracks, but once Satoshi completed the set she'd still enjoyed watching it run circle after circle, hour after hour, across the days.

"It's a marvel of replication," Satoshi told the woman as he placed the engine back on the tracks and attached a boxcar and red caboose. He tapped the control pad and the train began moving around the circular track. "The cars are rebonded nano, as is the crystal heart powering the engine," he said with pride. "But the tracks and wheels – I wanted to give Mr Tanner more time than allowed by mere rebonded nano. So they are original nano filaments. Never broken. Never degraded. He can run the train continually for the next hundred thousand years."

Satoshi was so pleased with his creation he didn't see the woman tear up. Paprika knew from previous interactions with olds that tears

were a bad sign, but no matter how Paprika tried to catch Satoshi's eye he didn't see her warning. He finished describing in loving detail the train and how it so completely captured Mr Tanner's original childhood memory. Only then did he notice the crying.

"I see," Satoshi said awkwardly. "Is this why Mr Tanner didn't come today?"

"He has become dead. I'm his great-granddaughter, Anya."

"I see," Satoshi repeated. Paprika was grateful he didn't ask what had happened. Except for the rare accident, most olds died during rejuvenation treatment. Or, less often, they lost the desire to live and no longer commanded their bodies to keep going – which to most olds was the same as an accident, only an accident of mind and soul.

The woman touched the train's control pad, bringing it to a stop. "The rejuvenation went poorly," Anya said. "In the end, as Tan's body collapsed, the only thing on Earth he desired was this train. But my family doesn't hold with pointless nostalgia."

Satoshi nodded sadly as Paprika began to cry woven drops of light which disappeared into her table. If she and Satoshi had known, they would have brought the train to Mr Tanner. Nothing would have stopped them on such a noble quest, no matter the wishes of his family.

As Paprika's tears flowed through the table, she decided mere illusion wasn't adequate for the occasion. She reformed the tears into solids and they plinked on the table, wetting and dancing like proper tears should.

Anya Tanner heard the tears, having enhanced senses like all the olds, and nodded solemnly at Paprika. The woman obviously approved of such honorable displays of sadness.

"Do you still desire the train?" Satoshi asked. "Mr Tanner would have wanted his family to have it."

Anya restarted the engine, which again circled the tracks with its boxcar and caboose. She walked over to Paprika and flowed her fingers through Paprika's ghostly hair. Paprika knew it was insulting not to harden her body so the woman could touch her, but she refused to do so. While she was sorry Mr Tanner never received his train, she didn't want this old touching her.

"A copy of Tan's memories and self is now stored in one like you," Anya said. "Perhaps that time angel saved all of him. But I wonder..."

Paprika glanced at her tears on the table before turning them yet again into illusion. She didn't want to speak. She didn't want to discuss the duty she so rarely performed. Besides, this woman was an old. While she had lived for many hundreds of thousands of years, she was still human. How could she comprehend Paprika's life? How could she understand the memories and sentience-maps of the six people trapped inside Paprika's self-contained pocket universe? How each stored memory and glimmer of awareness tickled Paprika's endless days? How she continually fought her programmed need to copy the consciousness of every old she met?

But Anya knew nothing of this. Instead, the old sighed, no doubt merely seeing Paprika as a potential vessel for her own immortality. "This is why my family refuses nostalgia," Anya said. "There's nothing in it. Only ghosts."

Paprika and Satoshi both remained quiet. As Paprika had observed across so many years of existence, such outbursts as Anya's were often an old's final plea before some memory – pushed from the mind for eons – demanded a return to life.

Sure enough, Anya walked over to the train and ran her fingers along the shiny tracks.

"I remember a green teddy bear," she said in a soft voice. "Not very well, but I think the memory is still here. Can you find it?"

Satoshi bowed gently. "If even the slimmest of memories exist in your mind," he said, "Paprika will tease it out." With a happy smile, Paprika hardened her body and leapt from the window display, taking Anya's hand as she led the woman to what she and Satoshi lovingly called their memory chair. As the woman sat down, Paprika ghosted her fingers through the woman's mind, searching for the green teddy bear.

Now that Anya was one of them, Paprika didn't mind touching her. Anya may still be an old, but Paprika figured she was now less of an old than moments before.

In honor of Mr Tanner, Paprika kept the train running for the next few thousand years. Day

and night the train circled its tiny track, its headlight glowing faintly. Sometimes, when Satoshi was focused on a project, Paprika sped up her time sense so the train became a burning ring of red, going lightspeed fast. Other times she slowed her senses down so the train paused between one beat of its crystal heart and the next, its wheels forever hoping for the next move down those stiff unending tracks.

But as the centuries passed into millennia, and the few hundred olds left in the city died one by one, fewer customers visited Satoshi's shop. Naturally, Satoshi took their lack of customers with his typical ease. "The mind adjusts to not working after a while," he said one day.

Paprika frowned. While Satoshi's machines could create anything he needed – food, water, and an endless stream of toys – olds like him couldn't exist forever without a goal to work toward. Their minds weakened and their will to live ebbed.

Paprika tried to keep Satoshi's spirits up. She teased out memories of toys from the six lives she'd already copied to her pocket universe. But while Satoshi always created toys from these memories – games and bouncing balls and a pyramid which continually rebuilt itself from self-rearranging blocks – his heart wasn't in it. Paprika feared that without something to aim for Satoshi would stop desiring to live. That he would let himself die.

One night while Satoshi slept, Paprika cursed herself for being so selfish as to want her friend to keep living. *You are a time angel*, other time angels sang in her mind, their words reaching her from all points across the world and echoing the edicts of their original programming. *Let him die so you can save his memories and self. All that he is will live forever, safe and sound until the universes themselves boil to an end.*

"Maybe he doesn't want me to save him," she whispered back. "That's why we're friends. He loves me for who I am, not what I can do for him."

A disappointment! the time angels screamed. *That's all you are. Can't you feel what the other time angels have saved?*

She could feel it, she really could. When she wasn't around Satoshi her programming opened

her up to her fellow time angels. To the millions and millions of olds they had copied and stored. There were now so few olds left on Earth that many of the time angels refused to seek out any more humans. Instead, they embedded themselves into stone and land, protecting their pocket universes as they slept through fast-time.

It's not too late for you, her fellow time angels yelled in anger. *Save Satoshi. Redeem yourself.*

As the angry words flowed through her, Paprika rocked back and forth in her window, looking out at the dark empty street and the dark empty buildings of the dark empty city. While she knew she shouldn't give voice to the question that was building – that doing so would be dangerous – she couldn't stop herself. She hated her programming. And she was tired, so very tired of the constant nagging to do her duty.

"What's so great about living forever in an empty pocket universe?" she asked.

The anger and pleading from both her fellow time angels and her internal programming fell to silence, unable to answer. Paprika grinned, pleased she'd finally said what she'd wondered about for so long.

Then her pleasure turned to worry as the silence continued, neither her fellow time angels nor her internal programming even protesting her question. The silence built the rest of that night and into the next day, the sun rising and setting as Paprika refused to move, afraid that mere motion might destroy her. The silence flowed again through fading sun into night, the stars sparkling without a care on Paprika's discomfort.

Finally, as morning returned a second time, the silence ended. "I'll teach her," a single voice announced.

Paprika nodded, pleased the silence had ended but also wondering whether this was her programming speaking or one of the other time angels, and what exactly she needed to be taught. But she had no way of knowing so she stood up, stretched, and walked across the shop to see what Satoshi had been up to the last few days.

When Paprika's lesson didn't arrive during the next hundred years, she stopped thinking on what it might be. Instead, she worried

about Satoshi and his lack of customers. In an attempt to keep Satoshi from losing his will to live, Paprika began wandering the ancient city, looking for olds. Looking for someone who still craved the toys only Satoshi could create.

She tried to pretend she was merely dancing like always, letting her happiness carry her outside the shop. But Satoshi knew better.

"There's no need to trouble yourself, Paprika," he said one day while sweeping up nano dust. "If there are people who desire what I give, they'll come."

"Perhaps they need a gentle reminder of what we offer."

Satoshi laughed, his first laugh in decades. "Spoken like a true time angel."

Paprika frowned until she realized he was right. She was merely being herself.

With a bow to Satoshi she walked out into the city.

Despite the brave face Paprika wore for Satoshi, it was difficult for her to remain happy when she walked the nearly empty city. Instead of seeing the gleaming towers rising two kilometers above her, her pocket memories would surge forward, forcing her to remember when the towers were full of people. The six people she'd copied had loved the buzz of conversations which constantly flowed from their own lips and the mouths of everyone around them – discussions and dreams and plans which had seemed so important at the time but now rang as hollow as the city.

Each time Paprika recalled such memories, she would remind herself that they weren't hers. Her memories were separate, kept in her programming, while these memories arose from her pocket universe.

But keeping them separate sometimes made Paprika want to scream in pain. One moment she'd be dancing among the giant statues of forgotten heroes in the city's Memory Park, and the next she'd see the park as it was three hundred thousand years ago, with crowds of people – and kids, always so many laughing kids – watching the kite fights. She'd stare in amazement as red triangle kites and blue neon squares and glowing fabric boxes swooped and climbed as the crowd cheered.

On one trip through the park, the memories became too much and Paprika collapsed into the neatly gened giggle grass, which tickled her face as the green blades reached for her. Above her several whisper oaks shaped the breeze into the pleasant babble of ancient words and conversations. She smashed her hardened hand into the grass, cursing it for not knowing all the people they'd once welcomed were gone. But the grass merely bent under her blow, not caring that she wanted it dead.

"Are you okay, Paprika?" a familiar voice asked.

Paprika looked up to see Anya Tanner standing over her, the old's red hair blazing in the dimming light of dusk. Anya held the green teddy bear Satoshi had made for her. The bear waved a furry paw in greeting as Anya sat down beside Paprika in the grass.

"What's the matter?" Anya asked. The teddy bear stared into Paprika's eyes, also curious about their friend.

Paprika wiped her face, even though she hadn't created any tears. "It hurts," Paprika said. "I remember what this park was like back then. I mean, the people I carry remember."

Anya sighed and ran her fingers along the gened grass blades so they rustled to the faint, whispered laughter of children. The teddy bear rolled across the giggle grass, adding even more laughter to the breeze.

"I know what you mean," Anya said. "I try not to dwell on what has been. But sometimes the memories still come. Like when I see you here. You remind me of all the kids who no longer play in this park."

Paprika sat up and held Anya's hand. In the thousands of years since she'd met Anya, she'd grown to really like this old. She especially liked Anya because she refused to allow herself to be copied and stored in the pockets of the few time angels who still passed through the city.

"Why aren't there any more kids?" Paprika asked. While she could access memories of kids from the six people she'd copied, she'd never known any personally.

"What use are kids when you can live forever? When you can copy yourself to live on after you die?"

"But what if it's not true living?" Even as Pap-

rika formed the question, her programming shrieked at her. Cursed her for daring to question her sole duty and purpose.

"What do you mean?" Anya asked.

"I mean," Paprika said, forcing herself to speak over her programming's anger, "what if the memories and sentence-maps we time angels save are only dead copies of who you are? Not the whole of who you are and have been?"

Anya reached over and hugged Paprika. "I think you worry too much, little time angel. It helps people to know their memories and consciousness might live on after them. That they'll never disappear. That's why humanity created time angels in the first place. If your purpose makes people happy, why worry on the deeper aspects of what exactly you save?"

Paprika smiled at the reassuring words, and snuggled closer to Anya's body. "I'm worried about Satoshi," Paprika whispered. "Are there any toys you'd like him to create?"

The teddy bear frowned, obviously jealous at the thought of new toys, until Anya reached out to rub its green fur. "Don't worry, Boo, nothing could take your place." Anya then tapped her head. "However, I do remember a wonderful kite I used to fly in this park. But you have to promise not to go copying anything else in the old noggin. I'm not convinced there's anything up there worth saving for posterity."

Paprika giggled as she ghosted her hand and reached into Anya, quickly pulling out a glowing memory of a blue, soaring kite.

.....
It's so easy to forget time when you have so much of it. So it was for Paprika and Satoshi. After Paprika's meeting with Anya in the park, she avoided leaving the shop for a few millennia. She and Satoshi kept to their usual routine, with Paprika dancing while Satoshi created toys.

But then came the year where Satoshi grew worried. The worries began in the winter when the first snows coated the empty city, and grew more and more as spring arrived and fresh giggle grass burst forth from the cracks in the street outside the shop. Paprika yearned to ask what was wrong, but knew better than to say anything. These things always came out eventually.

And so, on a hot summer day, Satoshi told her.

"It's Anya Tanner," he said in a weak voice, sitting in their memory chair in front of the train tracks. "I think she has died."

Paprika immediately reached out to the city's information net, which hummed despite its age and decrepit state. Anya's smiling face popped up before her eyes and said, "Don't be stupid – I'm as alive as ever." But Paprika knew the real Anya never smiled such a silly smile. This was one of many avatars Anya kept. All the olds used them for communications. Even though the planet was nearly deserted the avatars still chatted with one another, millions of them laughing and gossiping as the nets around them frayed and cracked in advance of their eventual collapse.

"I'll go check on her," Paprika said, jumping up and running for the door. She wished now she hadn't waited for Satoshi to tell her. Maybe then she could have helped Anya.

"You should stay here," Satoshi said. "There's nothing you can do to help Anya. If she's alive, she's alive. If not, she's gone."

Paprika paused before the door, her body shaking as it ghosted in and out of solid form. *Go to Anya*, her programming screamed. *Copy her before it is too late!* Paprika tried to fight the urge. To tell herself she only wanted to check on her friend.

"Are you okay?" Satoshi asked.

Instead of answering, Paprika ghosted through the door and ran down the street. She ran past tall buildings still looking impressively new, their windows beaming back blue skies and their walls shimmering rainbow swirls. She ran past empty homes which should have been bustling to the lives of people.

But when Paprika stopped running and looked closely, she found cracks in the nano. A tuft of grass growing through the black of a road. A door which hung slightly from its frame. A thick coating of grime and mildew on those buildings whose nano had lost their repulsive charge.

Paprika knew the city wouldn't last beyond a half million more years. Not without people to take care of it.

She walked to a small house on the eastern side of the city, where Anya Tanner lived. The houses there were a strange mix. Their nano

walls and streets were still perfectly shaped, with vibrant colors and clear windows. But yards which Paprika remembered once being genetically trim were now choked with massive trees and thickets. When she reached Anya's house she found a grove of whisper oaks blocking the front door, the leaves having shaped themselves to say "Paprika, Paprika" over and over as the wind blew through their canopy. Paprika thought this strange – Anya had never been partial to whisper oaks so why would she have reworked the trees' genetic memories so they whispered her name? Even the chatter squirrels living in the trees glared at Paprika and repeated her name over and over in their usually unintelligible tongues.

Paprika shivered. Someone had done this genetic manipulation on purpose. Was this her lesson?

Unable to reach the front door because of the trees, Paprika ghosted through them, scaring the squirrels into chastising her with more chattering of her name.

Once inside, she discovered that the doors and windows were still shut, keeping all but a thin layer of dust out of the house. The dinner table was set for no one, the shelves and walls filled with moving pictures of people who beckoned Paprika to come and gaze at them. In one photo Mr Tanner waved at her. In another, a child-size Anya laughed in Memory Park as kites fought mock battles above her.

Like all the houses of the olds, this one contained a basic rejuvenation machine. The bed-sized machine would envelop anyone who lay inside it in a massive hug of pseudo-flesh and warmth, quickly rebuilding and replacing damaged body parts. But this machine no longer worked. The pink flesh of its exterior had been hacked and sliced, with long cuts showing where the machine had bled out and died.

Someone had attacked the machine. Paprika reached out her essence and felt for anyone in the house, but she was alone. She realized the attack had probably happened centuries before. The house was also secured from the inside, meaning whoever did this had never left.

Or, she thought, whoever did this didn't need to use doors.

Now more wary, Paprika continued her search.

On the only unmade bed in the house, Paprika found a mummified body with faded red hair. But where in life Anya's face had been regrown so often she rarely smiled, the mummy's face grinned as if death was the happiest event Anya had ever known.

Except death wasn't what Anya grinned over. As Paprika ran her fingers through Anya's hair, she felt the slight magnetic caress of another time angel. One of her brothers or sisters had copied Anya's memories before her friend died.

Paprika's programming screeched in fury. *That should have been you. You are a failure. You should let yourself die.* The programming shrieked so loudly Paprika's body fell apart, her ghostly pieces scattering across the room.

When she finally pulled herself together, several years had passed. Once she could again solidify her body, she stood up and kissed her dead friend on the forehead.

In the crook of the mummy's arm rested a green teddy bear. The bear nodded at Paprika's kiss and reached out as if to hug her.

Paprika picked up the bear and hugged it back.

Even though Paprika had only been gone a few years, time had been rough on Satoshi. His body had stiffened so much he walked with a cane, and when Paprika tried to hook him up to the rejuvenation machine, she discovered the machine destroyed, just as Anya's had been.

"A time angel did it," Satoshi said sadly. "He looks young, like you, but he has a most cruel manner about his bearing."

"But time angels don't kill people," she said, shocked at the attack. "Our programming forbids it."

"Ah, but this one hasn't killed me, has he? He merely damaged a machine I occasionally need, which isn't quite the same thing."

Unfortunately, Paprika couldn't argue with that reasoning.

That night she sat in her window, clutching to her breast Anya's green teddy bear. She reached out her mind to both her programming and her fellow time angels. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm truly sorry for questioning my function. Please tell me what I can do to help Satoshi."

Her programming didn't answer. Instead, the same voice she'd heard before, the one which had promised to teach her, laughed. "You know what you need to do," the voice said, speaking with the same magnetic chill as the imprints left on the destroyed rejuvenation machines of Anya and Satoshi.

"I won't do it," she said.

"Then I will."

Reaching into the vast powers which kept her pocket universe contained, Paprika slapped the voice from her mind. She then ran to Satoshi's room, where her friend tossed gently in his sleep as if reliving a pleasant dream.

She stood beside Satoshi's bed and didn't move until he woke, refusing to let any other time angel even dare to approach his life.

For the next hundred years Paprika protected Satoshi. She could sense the other time angel nearby, but she knew he wouldn't risk approaching Satoshi while she was around. Instead, the other time angel spun on the edge of her awareness like a shooting star, far enough away that Paprika sometimes doubted if he existed, but close enough that he could easily keep track of Satoshi.

She searched throughout the city for a working rejuvenation machine, but there were none. Those that had worked were damaged, the same as at Anya's house. She also didn't find any other olds. They were all gone. Only Satoshi remained.

On one of her searches, she felt the other time angel approaching Satoshi's shop. Paprika raced home to find a small boy about to enter the doorway.

He's mine, Paprika's programming shrieked and she immediately grew her power until she filled the street, flickering in colors of red and black and anger, purest anger, howling as she attacked the time angel with all her strength. But instead of fighting back, the boy merely grinned and ghosted away, as if pleased by how easily Paprika had given in to her programming. He disappeared back to the edges of her awareness.

Then one day Satoshi announced he would die.

"I suspect it is better to embrace my time," he said, "than to slowly lose so much of myself that

I don't know when death will come."

Paprika nodded. She suspected Satoshi knew she'd been protecting him, and that doing so was slowly exhausting her, wearing down her will to fight her programmed sense of duty. Having long since resigned herself to this moment, Paprika walked into the workshop, returning a moment later with the memory chair where people sat when she caressed their minds. She thought it proper that Satoshi sit here when she copied all he was to her pocket universe.

"No, my friend, I won't be going with you."

That caused Paprika to cry for real, tears which she couldn't control, tears which phased in and out of solidity no matter how she tried to stop them. She'd always assumed Satoshi would copy his life into her before he died. That he'd live on alongside the copies of the other people she'd shared her life with.

"Forgive me," Satoshi said, "but I don't want to burden you with my petty life."

"What if I want that burden?"

Satoshi smiled and held her tiny hand, but he shook his head softly.

Paprika cried as she hugged Satoshi. "Please," she asked a final time. "It's what humanity created me to do."

"There are always things we're made to do," Satoshi said. "But this, I cannot allow."

"But you'll live forever."

"Do you truly believe that?"

Paprika paused, wanting to say no, to say the memories and sentience-map she'd copy to her pocket universe wouldn't be the same as the Satoshi she'd spent so many years with. That Satoshi's life in this toy shop, creating wonders for the world while Paprika danced in joy, would never be the same as any mere copy of the man.

But her programming quivered at the forbidden thought, causing her truthful response to dangle unspoken on her lips. "I copy and save all that you are," she said instead, repeating the lies time angels had always spoken. "Your memories and life will never be destroyed."

Satoshi squeezed Paprika's hand. "I already have that."

Paprika's body shook, unsure what Satoshi meant.

"When I craft toys for people, the memories

they create last long after I'm gone," he said. "And those memories cause people to live their lives in such a way that a touch of me is never forgotten."

"But there's no one left. Everyone you built toys for is long dead. Their memories now only exist as copies within time angels."

"Not true. The memories of me and my toys live on in you. Not in your pocket – in your mind. In your life."

Paprika nodded, and a slight smile crossed her face even as her programming screamed at her, even as the anger from other time angels leaped at her and warned her not to do this. But she didn't care. Satoshi was right. While the memories and lives in her pocket universe might never die, they might as well be dead for all the good they did in this world.

Satoshi didn't say another word. Paprika held his hand through the night until, shortly after dawn, he gasped and didn't breathe any more.

After that, Paprika couldn't stay in the shop.

Keeping her body solid, Paprika formed a backpack from her essence and placed inside it a number of Satoshi's toys, along with Anya's green teddy bear. She was tempted to take the train but decided instead to keep it running. She picked up the memory chair and set it beside the train, then carried Satoshi's body and rested him there.

This is good, she thought as the train ran circles before Satoshi's slumped form. When she left she'd leave the shop's door open. She'd seen how quickly human bodies decayed when not sealed in houses and buildings – a few centuries and Satoshi would be nothing but dust. But his train would run and run and run. Perhaps the chatter squirrels or other animals would stop by and be touched by the beauty of the toy running on long after the man who created it had died.

As she left the house, Paprika saw the time angel standing across the street. His small-boy-like face and body quivered with anger.

"You didn't save him," he said. "He died. And is gone. All gone."

"It's what he wanted."

"You're not worthy of being a time angel," the boy screamed, his words echoing to the voices of the other time angels. The boy flickered as

his body ghosted to extraordinary size, swelling with power and rage.

Paprika had never before worried what this time angel could do to her because his powers were a simple mirror of her own – at most they might fight to a draw. But this time the boy swelled with far more power than she possessed. Paprika realized the boy was drawing energy from the world's other time angels. She had so insulted their sense of duty and purpose that all of them were united in a desire to destroy her.

For the first time ever, Paprika felt true fear. But not fear for what might happen to the six people copied in her pocket universe, which according to her programming should have been the only fear which mattered. No, Paprika feared for herself. If she died, there would be no one left who remembered Satoshi.

The boy reached for her, massive waves of power ready to rip her core to pieces and even destroy her pocket universe. But instead of fighting Paprika simply ghosted away, passing through Satoshi's toy shop and shooting across the city and beyond until the boy lost track of where she was.

From then on, Paprika walked. She couldn't stay in one place more than a few months without the boy and the other time angels locating her.

Depending on the latitude, Paprika walked around the Earth once every few years. Sometimes she stayed solid and walked along the ocean floor; other times she ghosted and walked the waves. But either way she circled the planet over and over, from far north near the Arctic Circle to the equally frigid wind-swept ice of Antarctica.

As she walked she saw no other olds. All the cities were as empty as her city. All the homes and buildings were bare.

To pass the time she sometimes took Satoshi's toys out of her backpack and played with them. The green teddy bear would sing songs for her while she clapped and danced. If she closed her eyes it was almost like Satoshi was still alive.

She also dipped into the lives of the six people in her pocket universe. Their sentience-maps and memories sat inside her like cold and unmoving

creations – nearly alive, but totally unlike the people they'd once been. She realized Satoshi had been correct. There was a big difference between a living person in this world and that person's basic components stored unchanging for all time.

She was tempted to simply destroy their lives – to collapse her pocket universe in the explosion of bound energy which enabled her to keep it intact. But she knew that would be disrespectful to those six people.

Instead, she shared their memories. She implanted many of them into the mind of the green teddy bear, which giggled as it suddenly remembered living in the ancient cities of Earth and playing with its own teddy bears as a child. She also placed memories into the gened animals which now lived on the planet, such as the chatter squirrels which mimicked human speech. She knew the ancient geneticists who'd created these species would have hated her actions, but they were no longer around to complain. And she always took care to only gift the animals with happy memories and genes, usually related to playing with toys.

She even reworked the genes of the whisper oaks, implanting the joy of Satoshi's toys within their limited memories. When she finished the wind made their leaves whisper his name over and over, and standing near their trunks left one with a burning need to go and experience the endless playtime of the forest.

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Whenever Paprika saw another time angel – usually that boy but sometimes others like him – she ghosted away as fast as she could. But each time she escaped she felt their combined power coming closer to capturing her.

It would be only a few centuries before they caught her.

So it was that Paprika returned to Satoshi's toy shop. She'd avoided coming here because she knew the time angels would be watching. But now she didn't care.

Satoshi's shop stood as before, but in the thousands of years since she'd left the building's nano had weakened and no longer repelled dust and dirt. The street outside had also completely broken down, allowing vines and trees to grow up

around the shop. And most surprisingly, the window she'd sat beside for so many centuries had actually broken. She wondered what could have done that, then remembered the time angel boy. He'd probably done it out of spite at not being able to kill her.

Paprika stepped into the shop. While the door was still open, the plants and trees hadn't been able to grow very far into the shop due to a lack of sun and rain. A thick layer of dust coated everything, with tiny paw prints showing where families of chatter squirrels had made their home here.

In the middle of the shop sat the table with the train on it, which still ran circle after circle over its tracks. Paprika stepped to the table, which was clean of dust. On the chair before the table lay Satoshi's bones, which had been stacked into a neat pile sometime after the rest of his body decayed.

Paprika smiled. She hadn't expected the train to be still running. Obviously someone had kept the train's tracks clear of dust and dirt and made sure Satoshi's bones weren't scavenged by animals.

"It seemed proper," the boy said, stepping from Satoshi's old bedroom. "After all, thanks to you this is all he has to be remembered by."

For a moment Paprika's programming hissed, reminding her of her now-forsaken duty before dying down again. But she'd long since learned to ignore what her programming said to do.

"If you want Satoshi to be remembered, you should let me live. I'm carrying around many memories of my time with him."

The time angel twitched, as if physically ill at Paprika's heresy. "Your memories of the man are an abomination," he said, reaching out to the other time angels around the world, who each provided a bit of power to him. "If you promise not to flee again, I'll let us depart this place before I kill you. There's no reason for me to destroy your friend's legacy too. Even if that legacy is only a single toy churning above dust and bones."

Paprika looked around the shop, from the counter where Satoshi had waited on customers to his magical workbench to the window she used to sit beside. For a moment she smiled as

memories raced through her mind. But as much as she'd loved her time here with Satoshi, her memories didn't depend on this shop for life.

"Do you know what I've realized?" she asked. "About the powers we have? Why all the world's time angels are only able to share a bit of their powers with you right now?"

The boy shook his head, uncertain where this was going.

"I realized we only have a little bit of power to share because we use so much power constraining the pocket universes within us."

The boy paled, and opened his mouth as if to protest, as if to beg Paprika not to do what she was about to do. But for once there wasn't enough time for even a single word. Without even a second thought, Paprika reached into her being and destroyed the bound energies maintaining her pocket universe. The energy rushed into her core, feeding her powers, feeding her soul, which she immediately directed toward the boy, who had barely begun to comprehend her ultimate heresy when the wave of energy smashed into him.

As she released the powers constraining her universe Paprika slowed her time sense. She saw every part of the boy's essence as it was destroyed. Saw him try to ghost away before the energy wave overwhelmed him. Saw his own universe implode along with its stored memories and sentience-maps. Saw the red circling train turn to light. Saw Satoshi's bones and the shop and the city around them convert to energy as the explosion swelled toward the horizon.

When the counter explosion from the destruction of the boy's own universe reached Paprika, she threw up all the power she now possessed. She rode the explosion out of the city, dancing on the energy like she'd once danced in Satoshi's shop.

The time angels never again troubled Paprika. They were horrified at what she'd done – that she'd not only destroy her own universe but take the boy's with her, destroying the thousands of lives he'd copied. Paprika tried to point out that the time angels had planned to do the same to her but they couldn't comprehend such sameness. To their eyes Paprika was perverted and

deserved to be destroyed. The boy was merely doing his duty as a true time angel.

But even if the time angels couldn't understand her reasoning, they now feared her. Without the need to maintain her own pocket universe, Paprika had more power than the other time angels combined. Unless they also forsook their pocket universes, which was something they'd never do.

Instead, they agreed to leave Paprika alone.

And so time passed.

For the first few centuries Paprika healed the city. Not that she could rebuild what she'd destroyed. But she carried in dirt and rocks by hand, filling the massive crater a drip and a drop at a time. She planted whisper oaks and giggle grass and even chased angry chatter squirrels back there to live.

Once the crater was gone, she gathered the biggest blocks of broken nano she could find and built a massive pyramid, modeling it on the toy pyramid Satoshi had once built. The pyramid stood on the spot of Satoshi's old toy shop. She even carved his name into its sides.

Once Paprika was satisfied with her work, she pulled off her backpack and removed her toys, making sure to first play with the teddy bear and the various games and balls and puzzles. She then reached into herself and crafted a new pocket universe. Not one as powerful as her last one, but it would do. With a final hug to the teddy bear, she placed the toys in her new universe, where they would be safe.

She then sped up her time sense, going faster and faster until there was no night or day, merely a continual gray merging of the two. Trees grew like vines and vines moved like animals, the seasons passing to blinks of her eyes. Vegetation and soil climbed the pyramid, eventually covering Satoshi's name. But by extending her powers she could still sense the single word, and it comforted her that this remained of his life.

She sped up her time sense even more, so the ground began to ripple and rock like waves of water as thousands of years passed in a single breath. Dirt and stone rose around Paprika as she closed her eyes. She felt the other time angels around the world, who had long since given in to

their own programmed urges for fast-time sleep. Even though she knew she'd never again be a time angel, she was glad she wasn't alone.

She felt her mind beginning to calcify. Felt her thoughts ending and her self dying off. She sighed, happy at the bliss of nothing. She could feel herself about to end...when something caught her senses.

The pyramid had changed. Someone had uncovered it.

Paprika hesitated, yearning to give in to the nothing blur of fast time. To answer the final demands of the programming she had otherwise forsaken.

But she had to know.

So she awoke.

The world had changed and yet not changed. After she woke she found herself in a grove of what looked like whisper oaks, yet the words they spoke sounded strange. In the millions of years which had passed the trees had begun to shape the wind into far more than a few simple

words – they now spoke in sentences and even complete conversations. She reached out and touched one of the trees, causing a feeling of peace to flood into her. But she also felt a strong sense of play – of joy at all the fun waiting to be experienced in this world.

The remains of the pyramid rose from the forest before her. As she'd sensed during fast-sleep its stones were clear of trees and vegetation, while giggle grass flowered all around its base. As she stepped closer she saw where the long-lasting bonds of nano had broken down, with many of the blocks now cracked and broken. On the pyramid's lowest blocks lay what she guessed were toys. Wooden balls and blocks. Kites made of carved sticks and large leaves. Teddy bears crafted from dried clay.

Someone obviously kept the pyramid clear and maintained this area.

Smiling, she reached out her senses. She felt the remains of the time angels, now embedded deep in the Earth, their minds long since calcified, mindlessly protecting their pocket universes



"Nina Allan's re-imagining of the Arachne myth, with its receding overlays of the modern and the antique, creates a space all its own. The scene is clean and minimal, the light Mediterranean, the story seems musing and sad: but by the last two pages, *Spin* has you in a grip that persists long after you put it down" **M. John Harrison**

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full of unchanging lives as they fell through fast sleep. She also felt around the planet. There were still no olds. But a new species lived across most of the world. Their genes tasted similar to the chatter squirrels she remembered. Except they were bigger, and much smarter.

And they definitely loved to play.

She touched the trees again. *Come and play*, they said as her mind processed their new language. *Come. Play with us.*

She grinned. In the trees' new language, the word for play sounded similar to "Satoshi."

Looking around the forest, Paprika saw the descendants of the chatter squirrels watching her. Making sure they could see what she was doing, she opened her pocket universe and removed the toys she'd stored there. The green teddy bear stretched and yawned. The games and kites and balls and puzzles waited expectantly for someone to play with them.

She placed the toys beside the already existing toys on the lower blocks of the pyramid. Then, as several chatter squirrels edged closer to examine

her gifts, Paprika danced away, pirouetting into the air as the sun and trees laughed in tune to the whisper of "Satoshi! Satoshi!"

'Paprika' is Jason Sanford's thirteenth appearance in *Interzone*, with these stories including several Readers' Poll winners and a Nebula Award finalist. Jason is currently completing an SF novel based on his 'Plague Birds' stories, meaning he'll have to enter the hellish realm of agent and book publisher submissions in the coming months. His website is www.jasonsanford.com.

Of 'Paprika' Jason says: "It was inspired by the life of acclaimed anime director Satoshi Kon, who passed away in 2010 at the age of 46. In addition to animating the award-winning film which lent this story its title, Kon also directed several other influential anime films including *Millennium Actress* and *Tokyo Godfathers*. His final film, *Dreaming Machine*, was incomplete at the time of his death. His fellow animators have been attempting to complete the film based on his script and designs, but funding remains an issue and no release date has been announced."

one. They shouldn't be rushed. They should be full of places, of encounters: With the young man afflicted with a curse. A fascinating epic poem on which Layla bases her newest work. The masterpieces of ancient sibyls, catching dust in the museum. Spiders weaving in the sunlight, busy at their work. The details so clear, so well-chosen to make a story" **Lois Tilton, Locus Online**

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FILAMENTS

LAVIE TIDHAR



"Reality," said the robo-priest, "is a thin and fragile thing."



R. Brother Patch-It looked at its small congregation. This node of the Church of Robot sat on the Level Three Concourse of Central Station, in the station's own multifaith bazaar, besides the wire-head emporiums and games-worlds and flesh pits. R. Patch-It watched its congregation. Few followed the true faith any more. Robots alone, it sometimes seemed to R. Patch-It, still believed. Others, those strange, bodiless digital intelligences, had abandoned belief for worlds of pure mathematics, an infinity of virtual possibilities. While humans needed, sometimes craved, faith, they seldom knew which one to choose, and competition was fierce when one had Judaism alongside Roman Catholicism, Buddhism against Elronism, the Martian Re-Born alongside Islam.

And the Church of Robot was austere, robots saw themselves as metal shepherds, the awkward link between human physicality and Other transcendence. R. Brother Patch-It coughed with the voice of a long-dead man and resumed the sermon. "Reality," it said, and faltered. The congregation watched attentively. Missus Chong the Elder in the pews at the back, and her friend Esther, they were religion-shoppers, sampling each faith like connoisseurs, covering their bets the closer they got to old age. A group of disgruntled house appliances watched the sermon in the virtuality – coffee-makers, cooling units, a couple of toilets – appliances, more than anyone else, needed the robots' guidance, yet they were often wilful, bitter, prone to petty arguments, both with their owners and with themselves. There had never been that many robots. Humanoid, awkward, they belonged in neither world, the real or the unreal, and none had been made for a century or more. To make ends meet, R. Brother Patch-It doubled as a *moyel* for the Jews of Central Station. In that, at least, it was valued. It was a good *moyel*, and had been ordained, and could perform the delicate surgery of removing the foreskin, expertly, there had never been complaints. In its younger days R. Brother Patch-It had toyed with the idea of conversion. Becoming a robot Jew was not that far-fetched, there was a famous rabbi on Mars who was one of the first robots ever made. But it was not easy becoming a Jew. It was a faith that discouraged strangers.

"Consensus reality is like a cloth," it started again. The congregation listened, there was the sound of dry rustling in the small dark church, the smell of metal and pine resin. "It is made of many individual strands, each of which is a reality upon itself, a self-encoded world. We each have our own reality, a world made by our senses and our minds. The tapestry of consensus reality is therefore a group effort. It requires enough of us to agree on what reality *is*. To determine the shape of the tapestry, if you will."

R. Brother Patch-It liked that last addition. *If you will*. It lent a certain weight to arguments. "If you will," it said, savouring the words. "For reality to exist we must all will it into being. We dream –"

It hesitated again. Robots didn't dream, not as such. And the thrust of the argument was becoming positively Buddhist. R. Patch-It had often contemplated reincarnation. Many digitals were practicing Buddhists. The digital being born in the Breeding Grounds as a piece of specialised I-loop responsible for animating a coffee-maker could, in its next cycle, become a mind calculating the diffusion of distant nebulae, or a submarine shuttle riding to and from the underwater cities of the humans, or it could even transcend, become a true Other, disembodied, constantly mutating and changing, seeking that which was truth, and beauty, in the unreal.

But robots seldom changed, R. Brother Patch-It thought, a little sadly. They merely became more themselves.

"We dream a consensus of a reality," it said now. It coughed again. It had a range of carefully selected coughs. "Imagine the world is a vast network, all living things are nodes connected together by delicate threads. Without the network we would each be alone, isolated nodes, pinpricks of light in a vast intergalactic darkness. The Way of Robot is the way of seeking to be joined with all things. It is not an easy road. Often, it is a lonely road. The living and the ur-living both make reality. Let me guide you, now..."

R. Brother Patch-It lowered its head and the congregation did likewise, the humans and the digitals who followed. "Our maker who art in the zero point field, hallowed be thy nine billion names..."

The congregation murmured after the robo-priest. Then, one by one, they lined up to receive the sacrament. The digital wafer contained high-encryption Crucifixion routines. The humans put it on their tongues, where it slowly melted and was absorbed into the bloodstream and into the biological-nodal interface. The digitals received it directly. For a short moment, the small congregation of this Church of Robot node, on Level Three of Central Station, there between the cities of Tel Aviv and Jaffa, was truly Joined, forming one I-loop, agreeing on a consensus reality; however short-lived.

The bris went well, R. Patch-It felt. It was the youngest Chong boy, Levi. R. Patch-It had known the Chongs for generations, from Zhong Weiwei, the founder of the family, down to all the cousins and nephews and nieces and aunts that spread all around Central Station. The child's grandfather, Vlad Chong, sat in the seat of honour, the *sandak*, or godfather, to the child. The old man held the baby, but his face was blank, unseeing. A sickness of memory afflicted Vlad Chong. R. Patch-It worried for him.

But this was a time for joy. Carefully, the robot separated the foreskin from the infant's penis with its special knife, the *izmel*, while making the first blessing. Then it performed the *pria*, the revealing of the infant's glans by separating from it the inner preputial epithelium, again with the knife. The proud father made the second and third blessings. Then, watched by the attendant audience in the small synagogue, the robot performed the *metzitza ba'peh*, sucking at the wound until drawing blood.

The baby was crying. Carefully pouring the wine for blessing into its cup, which the robot held in its right hand, it announced the child's name – Levi Chong – and the name of his father, Elad. The robot drank from the wine. The child was now, by the ancient laws, a Jew. At last, R. Brother Patch-It dipped a metal finger in the wine and put it into the infant's mouth. The boy suckled on the finger and stopped crying. Everyone cheered. Missus Chong the Elder, who had been sister to Weiwei and still alive, cyborged but sharp, cried salt-water tears.

The ceremony ending at last, the baby ad-

mired by its relatives, the crowd moved to the next room, for the breakfast spread. Pastries and breads, *shakshuka* – fried eggs over a thick, slowly-cooked tomato and capsicum sauce – coffee from a samovar, a cheese platter, *burkeas* pastries filled with cheese or potatoes or mushrooms, omelettes, jam – hungry Chongs swarming over the breakfast buffet as though starved beyond belief. The robot moved amongst the family and friends, shaking hands, chatting – it held a cup of black coffee, which it sipped from, from time to time.

R. Patch-It stopped a moment before a man who looked familiar. He had the Chong look, but for a moment the robot could not place him. The man seemed quiet, comfortable in his surroundings, but there was something shy, perhaps reserved, about him, too. He stood next to a woman the robo-priest knew well: Mama Jones, proprietor of Mama Jones' Shebeen, on the Ne've Sha'anani street that led to the main gates of Central Station. Beside her was her boy, Kranki.

"Miriam," R. Patch-It said to the woman. "It is lovely to see you, as always."

"You, too, R. Patch-It," she said, smiling. They knew each other of old. The robot turned to look downwards. The boy's hacked, Armani trademarked eyes stared at him, a mischievous smile turning the corners of his mouth. "Hello, Kranki," R. Patch-It said. The boy made the robot feel clumsy, somehow. He unsettled R. Patch-It.

"Hey, metal man," the boy said. Miriam, shocked, said, "Kranki!"

"It's all right," the robot said. It noticed the Chong man beside Miriam couldn't quite hide a smile. "How are you, Kranki? Do you remember me?"

The robo-priest had been the moyel in Kranki's own bris, of course. The boy said, "I went to the beach yesterday with Yussuf. We caught a fish!" He made a shape with his hands. "It was *this* big."

Miriam – Mama Jones – put her hand on the boy's head. The robo-priest was about to speak when the boy said, "Let me show you!" His small hand went to the robo-priest's own metal one. The robot reached out automatically –

The boy's pointing finger touched the metal of the robot's palm, lightly.

What is the real?

The words whispered in the robot's brain. Billions of cycles, uncounted millions of branches on a quantum binary tree, shifting and merging, an aristocratic small-world network like a planet or a human brain, billions of disparate elements making up a single, precious I-loop, an illusion of being.

What is real?

The words whispered in the robot's old brain, auto-translated into a dozen languages, chief amongst them Hebrew and Asteroid Pidgin: *ma amiti? Wanem ia i stap ril?*

The images swarmed the robot's mind, a high-level onslaught of data in which a single image permeated: the boy, Kranki, and a seeming twin, a boy whose eyes were a green Bose trademark for Kranki's Armani blue. The two boys at the Jaffa beach, walking on water, fishing with their small hands, reaching into the clear blue of the Mediterranean Sea...

Which exploded into stars, galaxies swirling, planets orbiting yellow suns like baleful eyes, vast black-hulled spaceships moving like specks of dust amidst the planets, the view focuses, shifts, rings spinning in the space beyond Titan, killer drones fighting soundlessly in the Galilean Republics, intelligent mines tracking in orbit around Callisto, in the space beyond beyond, the song of spiders as they seeded the Oort Cloud with new nodes, on Dragon's World, a frozen moon off Pluto, the dragon's millions of bodies moving in the tunnels on their mysterious rounds, the whole ice-moon a vast extensive ant warren –

Wanem ia i ril?

On Mars, in Tong Yun City, at a wooded shrine under the great dome, the poet Bashō (the second Bashō) translating Shakespeare into pidgin:

Blong stap o no blong stap

Hemi wan gudfala kwesen ia

And across space, away from moving Mars and its twin moons burning with human-made lights, across *solwota blong spes*, images dancing, *solwota blong wori*, the sea of worry and these slings and *bunaro* of outrageous fortune –

On the Earth's moon the vast terraforming

spiders moved, dull silver metal silent, two boys standing on the surface, helmetless, laughing, as at a secret joke shared, with their hands signing:

Wanem ia i ril?

R. Patch-It was shocked out of the data-storm. It stood there, looking at the boy, the storm slowly receding.

"R. Patch-It?" Miriam Jones said. "Are you feeling all right?"

The I-loop tagged R. Patch-It came back to life, or on-line, or into being. "I am a robot," it said. "I seldom get sick."

Mama Jones smiled politely. The man beside her said, "I don't know if you remember me, Brother." He extended his hand for a shake. "Boris," he said, seeming suddenly embarrassed. "Boris Chong."

R. Patch-It looked at him. "*Boris Chong?*" it said – marvelled. Perfect images in its memory – a shy boy, tall, gangly, with a smile, he always had a smile, quiet child, before that the baby, R. Patch-It had sliced off his foreskin, it had been the moyel at that bris, too, and sucked at the wound until the blood came, and the ceremony was concluded, making Boris, too, a Jew – "But you had left, it was –"

The robot stopped, it could recite it to the day, the hour, the minute, had it wanted to. How had it not recognised him? But Boris had left a boy, returned a man, space changed him, the robot saw.

R. Patch-It itself had been to space, of course. Once, a century past, it had undertaken pilgrimage, the robot's *hajj*, to Mars, to Tong Yun City, to the Level Three Concourse deep under the sands of Mars, where the greatest of all multi-faith bazaars lies, there to meet the Robo-Pope itself, in the robot's Vatican. It had been a glorious occasion! Hundreds of robots, some former battle drones, some scrap-heap refugees, all congregating together, on Mars, from every habitable moon and planet they came, from Polyport on Titan and from the deserts of the Martian kibbutzim; from Lunar Port and Moscow, Newer Delhi to the Baha'i rings in orbit around Saturn. And one from Central Station. *Hajji* R. Patch-It, ordained in that great communion of physicality and digitality.

Then, too, at that meeting, some had chosen to go farther still. To accompany the Exodus ships, on their slow, one-way journeys out of the solar system. And some had chosen to remain, and in the depths of Mars to fashion new of their kind, to create children...

Children!

Perhaps it all came back to that, R. Patch-It thought, the data-surge fading, the image of these two Central Station children on the moon, Kranki and his friend. Children. It had circumcised hundreds of children, but never had one of its own.

"Brother?"

The human's voice brought it back to itself. "Boris Chong," the robot said, marvelling. "Where have you been all these years?"

The man shrugged. His hand, the robot noticed, went to Miriam's, the tips of his fingers touching hers. R. Patch-It remembered them, together, the boy and the girl they had been. Love made humans shine, as though they were metal filaments heated by an electrical current.

The human said, "I went to the Belt. Then Mars. I... I came back recently. My father -"

Yes, R. Patch-It wanted to say. Vlad Chong sat across the room, vacant eyes staring into space. Some humans suffered a gradual loss of memory, but for Vlad, the robot thought, it was the other way around. Vlad's mind was literally swarming with memory, perfect and enduring like diamond, memories stored since Weiwei's time and transmitted across the Chong family line. Vlad - Vladimir - could not see, for his gaze was turned, terribly, inside himself.

The robot nodded, shook Boris' hand, touched Miriam lightly on the shoulder. The boy, Kranki, had gone to play with the other kids. Boris had worked in the birthing clinics, R. Patch-It remembered. What manner of children had they made there, hacked out of rogue genomes and stolen code?

The robot felt - if robots could be said to feel, it thought - weary. Its body was running at less than optimum capacity. Its body was old, patched, the old parts were hard to come by, no one had manufactured robots in decades. R. Patch-It wanted to simply plug itself into a current, like a human wire-head at a Louis

Wu Emporium. The humans had found a way to stimulate the brain's pleasure centres with a low current of electricity. Sometimes R. Patch-It longed for Body, for sensation. The humans were sensation-addicts.

"Brother?"

The coffee had turned cold in the cup. R. Patch-It deposited it on a table and went to take another. Coffee was energy, a robot could convert food and drink into energy as efficiently as any human. But could it derive *pleasure* from it?

Pleasure was a difficult and bewildering concept. R. Patch-It thought it might make it the subject of next week's sermon.

"Brother?"

The voice came again and this time it registered. R. Patch-It turned. The two smiling men, holding hands, stood before him. "Yan," R. Patch-It said. "Youssou!"

They, too, made a handsome couple, it thought. Yan was a Chong; Youssou was of the Jones' of Central Station. "Is it official?" R. Patch-It said.

The two men beamed even more. "It is," Youssou said.

"We had a fight," Yan said - shy, proud. So much like his cousin Boris, R. Patch-It thought.

"He was going to do it that night -" from Youssou.

"I had it all ready. We were at the Grand Lounge -"

"I wasn't ready," Youssou said. "I didn't think I was ready."

"He walked away, we didn't speak for a month. But..."

"I missed him." They both said it together, then laughed.

"Mazal tov!" the robot said. It clasped them on the arms. So much love, both young and old, in that room. It must be spring again, R. Patch-It thought. It almost hadn't noticed. Spring had that effect on humans.

"We made up, I couldn't sleep, I was living in the adaptoplant tenements," Youssou said.

"I was sleeping in the lab," Yan said. "I was working all the time."

"We got together, and -"

"Mazal tov," the robot said again.

Yan said, "Brother. We wanted to ask you something."

"Anything," R. Patch-It said. Meaning it.

"We'd like you to marry us," Youssou said.

They both looked at him, expectantly. The robot looked at them both. "I would be honoured," R. Patch-It said.

Weddings it had done, officiated over before. Weddings and circumscisions, and funerals, too. A robot, R. Patch-It thought, more than anything a robot needed *purpose*. Shaking hands all around, metal against flesh. "Thank you, brother!" relatives gathering around to congratulate the young couple. Miriam Jones and Boris came over, Boris clapping his young cousin on the back.

"Brother Patch-It," a voice said. It was Missus Chong the Elder, coming over. They looked at each other. She was more than half-machine. She smiled. "It will be an honour for my family to have you officiate," she said.

The ceremony would be conducted in the manner of the Church of Robot. Central Station was an amalgamation of faiths, the Jewish Chongs, a

mix of Chinese and Israeli Jew, the Chows were Roman Catholic, a Chinese-Filipino family several generations back, the Joneses were, well, it wasn't sure, though Miriam Jones could often be found at the shrine for St Cohen of the Others.

"Thank you," the robot said. "Thank you for asking me."

Could a robot feel? If you pricked a robot, it did not bleed. If asked, R. Patch-It couldn't say whether it *felt*, for feeling was so much a function of biological factors, of hormone levels and nerve endings, of physical sensation. But if it felt, then it felt, right then – overwhelmed, it thought. Tired, elated – suddenly the room full of humans felt oppressive, it needed space, solitude, time to withdraw from the physicality. Some of the robots left the Church, they abandoned physicality, went into the digitality, incorporeality, the realm of Others. Some went on the Exodus ships, some transformed, reincarnated themselves into humbler vessels, one could sometimes encounter an ancient coffee

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maker that had once been robot, seeking a different path to enlightenment in service.

"Brother?"

"Please, Missus Chong," the robot said. "I must retire."

She looked at him and her eyes were inhuman, understanding. One day Missus Chong the Elder would shed the last of her humanity and become a seeker like itself. It had hopes for Missus Chong, she was the most promising of Brother Patch-It's novices.

She nodded, a small, barely perceptible gesture. The robo-priest made its way out of the room. It was still uncertain as to what happened with the boy, Kranki. The boy was not entirely human, it realised. He was Other-touched.

The robot made its way to the elevators and rose to Level Three, and walked, slowly, to the node of the church. Once inside, it opened the door to its own private space, past the reception room and into the small, dark closet where it could truly be alone. It shut itself inside. Opened

its mind to the Conversation, the vast and never-ending transfer of data across the worlds, and the words floated again in its mind, unanswered: *wanem ia i ril?*

Brother R. Patch-It floated through space, watching multiple feeds through multiple nodes. A child was born on a Martian kibbutz, in the space around Io an ancient mine exploded itself, committing suicide, on Titan a *muezzin* was calling the faithful to prayer. Space was full of questions, life was a sentence always ending in an ellipsis or a question mark. You couldn't answer everything. You could only believe there were answers at all.

To be a robot, you needed faith, R. Patch-It thought.

To be a human, too.

Lavie Tidhar is the World Fantasy Award winning author of *Osama* (2011) and *The Violent Century* (2013, reviewed in this issue), in addition to many other works and several awards.

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CLAIRE HUMPHREY HAUNTS

The surgeon's knife severs my little finger from my palm, just above the mount of Mercury.

"You are permitted to look away," the surgeon comments.

I shrug the shoulder that isn't locked down, and keep watching. The knife, obsidian, joints me like I'm a bird.



Somewhere inside my forearm I feel the pull of my tendon loosed. Little blood, and no pain; the surgeon knows her work, and the numbness of the lockdown extends all the way to my breast. In five minutes the surgeon has stowed the finger in its cooler, joined flaps of skin over the hollow socket, and healed it over with a couple of passes of a graft-stick.

"You'll have minor pain for a few weeks," she says. "You don't need to keep it covered. The scar will change colour; that's normal. If you feel a loss of sensation or have any discharge, come back to me."

She takes off the lockdown and feeling surges back through my breast, up over my trapezius, down my arm. I flex my hand. Sure enough, it hurts. Nothing I can't bear.

She walks me to the front desk. The buyer waits there. An attendant comes out and hands him the tiny cooler tagged with my name.

The buyer grins at her, then at me. He flips me the envelope with my cash in it.

"You'll make another fighter very happy," the buyer says, shaking my right hand, the whole one; looking to the door.

The surgeon is gone already, back into her operating room.

I don't insult the buyer by counting the cash in front of him; I wait until his van disappears round the corner.

The money's all there. Halfway through counting it I find I have to lean against the wall. The surgeon's attendant gets me a chair and a glass of water.

She says the surgeon won't mind if I lie down for a bit, but I wave her away. I'll be fine in the fresh air.

I take my money to the office of the governor and I pay the taxes on the school for this quarter, and the overdue ones from last. That does for the envelope, almost all of it.

My finger's bought me three months.

I use a bit of my remaining fee to buy a bottle of vinho verde. At the school I let myself in and ascend the stairs. All the walking has my bad leg aching, along with the new seam of skin where my finger was. When I uncork the wine I take a small swallow for myself. Only one. The rest is for the haunts.

I bring the open bottle to the east window, just under the eaves. From up here the haunts are quite visible: standing apart from each other, looking aimlessly up and about, their shrouds pale against the dark privet leaves.

All the graduates of the Flanders Park School for Duellists, gathered here in its old garden. All but two. And then I see him, Kordelo, newly come, leaning against the high fence under an overhanging willow. So it's all but one, and that one is me.

I wave to Kordelo.

He waves back, in the languid manner they all share. They used to be sharp, lusty, furious, darting, meticulous, gleeful, a hundred different things according to their natures and their whims. Now they're all like this, wandering between the garden walls. Sometimes the constellation of their placement barely changes between dawn and dusk.

I wonder if I'll enjoy it, when I am with them. They do not look sad, exactly, but they do not look like duellists. Not even Kordelo, who still has the memory of his long blade with him, drooping from his hand.

They cluster slowly beneath the window as I watch. When they've assembled, I tilt the bottle.

Pale wine spills down. The haunts come in like moths drawn to the light of it.

The bottle empties fast. The haunts seem to wait for more.

After a long minute they drift apart again, silent and separate. The ones who were lovers in life show each other no favour now; the ones who were rivals show each other no spite.

Once in a while they show me a flicker of something: a hand raised to request or acknowledge.

I am the last of them, and so long as I have the power, I will keep us all in our home.

I still have many fingers, and I hear the thumbs will fetch a bit more than the others.

In the plaza, the flag is still at half mast for Kordelo, but that hasn't stopped anyone from posting today's duel.

I cross the grounds. Chalk marks, dried blood, shoe-scuffs, and the dung of dogs. Tacked to the flagpole, the duel-sheet flutters in the breeze: Paulo and Juvela.

It was Juvela who beat Kordelo; she came out of it scatheless. If I was still duelling, I'd be honour-bound to challenge her. As I am a civilian now, the code forbids me any reprisal.

I am very nearly glad of that. Juvela has the kind of grace no duellist wants to see ruined. She might make it to the capital this year. Kordelo wouldn't have gone so far, had he lived, and someone else might have taken him less cleanly.

A guy in a fine woolen coat lounges on the rim of the fountain. Thirtyish and with a soft belly on him. Even with my bad leg I know I could take him.

"You Alekra?" he says.

I incline my head.

"I guessed from the missing finger. Heard you started selling off. I hope you got a fair price."

"If you're opening negotiations for my next sale, I guess I'd better tell you I don't come cheap," I tell him, easing down nearby on the stone fountain lip. "I took an opponent every day for thirty days in a row, in my second season."

"What happened?"

"What always happens. Got cocky." Got drunk, in fact; got laid; slept the sleep of the just and woke up so late I almost missed the bells.

"I heard Hanana hamstrung you."

"Beginner's luck," I tell him. Hanana only lasted ten formal fights, all told; she gave it up to Kordelo not a week after ending my career for me.

"My loss," the guy says. "I came to the provinces too late. Wish I could've seen you work."

"Yeah, I was something."

"I'll bet you were." He extends his hand to me. "Adi Solomon."

"Not a duellist, then."

"No balls," he says. "Huh. So you can laugh, anyway. Want a plate of eggs?"

"Thanks, but -"

"Idiot. You're selling off fingers, I know you must be short of cash. Pay me back with some war stories, if you want."

I know nothing other than the duel. My guardian took me from the workhouse nursery right after he founded the school. He taught me himself, until the school grew larger, and then he would sometimes hand me off to the older students.

When he died, he left me the place. I'd entered the lists by then, but only just. I didn't know how to balance books or manage staff. I couldn't imagine another duelling-master in place of my guardian, so I never found the time to hire one.

The older students graduated. The newer students drifted away to schools with more famous masters. I figured I'd keep the school afloat with my winnings until I'd made enough of a name for myself.

Then I went down against Hanana. It felt like the end, but it was only one in a series of endings.

For a while the school lived on in its other students. A number did very well. Epifanio took the triple garland in the capital a year before he succumbed to influenza.

Kordelo was the last of the graduates still duelling. Everyone else went earlier, some in the plaza and some later in the hospital; one by infection after selling off her forefinger; one by fire; one by drowning. Kordelo had been recovering well from his injury, but then was killed by a blood clot that travelled to his brain.

I should have been among the crowd watching the procession of Kordelo's bier. I should have been at his wake, held at the Albion House. All sorts of rabble turn out for the passing of a duellist, though. I didn't trust myself not to toss a glove at anyone.

Anyway, I figured I'd see him again soon enough. The haunts might have known, too. When I watched them from my east window, the day of the wake, they stood in a cluster, looking downtown.

I tell Adi Solomon about the eclipse: the day of Paulo's first fight, which was called at a draw, because the crowd had superstitiously broken so many eggs that the whole plaza was slick with albumen.

I tell him about Hanana: how Kordelo took her in the femoral artery, as payment for me, and how I watched it on broadcast, from my hospital bed. I tell him how I wept there. I knew already that I wouldn't fight again.

I tell him about meeting the great Fajra, when I was no more than a girl myself, and how she chose her name, and how the rest of us still follow her.

I must be shocky from the surgeon, still. Or it's the coffee on my empty stomach. I tell him things he cannot possibly care to hear, things I did not even know I was thinking.

I don't tell him about my haunts.

The plate comes: three eggs, two slices of bacon, a mound of potatoes, four slices of rye toast, a grilled tomato and a sprig of parsley. I eat. Adi Solomon watches.

When he isn't watching me, he watches the plaza, where pigeons cross the white sky and paper bags blow over the cobbles. He sips coffee, and licks a drop of it from his round lower lip.

"What will you do," he says, "when you run out of fingers?"

Around the time of my first fight there was a quack selling fingers he claimed to be Fajra's. A couple of people bought them. They weren't really Fajra's fingers, of course, but some of them might have been someone's. At least one of those duellists went on to the capital and won garlands there.

I saw him interviewed on broadcast. He held up his hand. The newer finger looked pale and knobby compared to his other fingers. The graft scar ran in an uneven ring around his knuckle.

"It feels just like my old finger," he said, "when I'm not fighting. Except that sometimes it gets the rest of my hand to wrap itself around a pint glass."

I thought about nine other duellists, in nine other pubs, ordering nine pints they didn't know they wanted. I thought about whose finger I'd buy, if I lost one of my own to injury, or needed an edge.

I didn't think about having to sell my own, not then. In those days, most of the people I knew were alive.

Adi Solomon pays for our meal from a fat bill-fold. I think about knocking him down and taking it, but I'm comfortably full and besides, we wouldn't want to miss the start of the fight.

Outside, the crowd thickens. Pushcarts sell roasted chestnuts. Everyone mills about outside the bounds of the square.

I lead Solomon directly across the middle, back to the fountain. Some kids are sitting there

but they shift aside for me. When I look at them harder they shift a bit more for Solomon.

Lounging on the sun-warmed stone, with my bad leg propped up, my hands folded against a stuffed belly, and a third cup of coffee in me, I feel so damned nice that I have to do something to wreck it.

I hold out my left hand for Solomon to see, and flex the ring finger.

"Two grand," I tell him.

He exhales. "You shouldn't open the negotiations. You wait for the other person to go first."

"Go, then."

"I would've offered two at the outset myself," he says. "You could have beat me up to two and a half, if you were patient about it."

"So if we're both in the neighbourhood of two, doesn't that mean we can quit dancing and shake on the deal?"

"No," he says. "I'm not a buyer."

"I knew you weren't a buyer. You haven't even got a cooler for the finger."

Solomon raises his eyebrow at me. "You sold to one of *those* guys? This is breaking my heart."

"I don't need a manager, Solomon."

He shrugs, and looks away from me; he fumbles out a cigarillo, and lights one for me, too.

The bells ring, the crowd gets quiet, and I see the ushers coming up from the practice field, bearing their white-ribboned staffs.

Juvela waves to me, following behind. She's shorn her head since last week. An old scar stretches from her crown downward, splitting the cartilage of one ear.

Paulo, holding Juvela's hand according to custom, looks away from me.

I shift my cigarillo to the corner of my mouth to say, "He knows Juvela's going to beat him."

"Maybe you should sell him your finger."

"He wouldn't take it. He never faced me; he thinks he's better than me."

"Is he right?"

"He'll never know."

Solomon touches my ring finger with the tip of his own forefinger, careful not to brush the fresh scar next to it. "Maybe he won't. But you know."

I hold very still as his fingertip touches me, the way you do when a dragonfly lands on your

arm by the river. The touch glances away after a moment, leaving a phantom heat behind.

In the centre of the plaza, Juvela and Paulo display their favours, salute the cardinal directions and then each other. Juvela's favour is a scrap of green silk to match the new gem studding her ear.

Her stance is wide and low. If I had to find fault I'd say she was a bit flat-footed. The moment the crier sounds off, she skims up to Paulo, feints with her right and lunges with her left blade, and Paulo barely evades her with an ungainly side-slip.

"I see what you mean," says Solomon.

"She killed her man last week." I don't tell him I knew that man. "She's training for the Midsummer Garlands now, and the capital in the fall."

"And Paulo's not?"

"Sure, but he's not going to make it. Not this year. Maybe never."

"Ought to find another career, then."

"He's sworn to his patron. Even if Paulo figures out he doesn't have a shot, he's in it for the season. We don't back out once we're sworn."

"We? You aren't a duellist any more, Alekra."

I take the last smoke of my cigarillo into my lungs and I hold it there as long as I can. He's a civvie. You can't explain things to them.

The crowd shouts and I train my eyes on the fight. Paulo's managed to score on Juvela, lancing a shallow groove up her tricep, cutting across the maroon ridges of a dozen older injuries. You can tell a lot about a duellist by the pattern of scars. Me, I always seemed to take it on my forearms.

Juvela retaliates with a double attack, high and low. If her arm's weakened, I can't tell. She gets Paulo with her right point on a cross-thrust, nicking him just under the collarbone. His jerkin stops most of it. The blood blooms slowly.

Time. The two fighters retreat to their corners, where white-ribboned staffs stand in sand-buckets. A page gives Juvela a water-bottle to suck, and she bends down so that he can towel the sweat from her head and the blood from her arm.

Beside me, Solomon drops his boots to the ground, pushes himself upright, and walks away.

I see Paulo, on the other side of the grounds, exchanging his gored jerkin for a fresh one. His

bared back is a shade less brown than his arms. His ribs heave under his skin. His patron stands nearby, exhorting him, and Paulo nods and nods.

Solomon comes back just as the crier sings out again. He unscrews the cap of a rectangular bottle, sips, and hands it to me.

It tastes of iodine and earth and gunpowder, and I savour it.

On the cobbles, Juvela's feet stamp and shuffle. She skates over the uneven ground.

She misses Paulo's trapezius with a thrust of her long blade, but punches the quillon of her short blade left-handed past his temple, breaking the skin like peach-flesh. At the same time Paulo lays the flat of his long blade blindly across Juvela's back, so that he catches her right elbow on the backswing. Both cry out. They disengage.

Paulo attacks while Juvela's arm is still numbed. She backsteps, snaking her spine and hollowing her belly so that the blade skims past her. She switches her long blade into her left hand, tossing her short blade so that it skitters over the line into the crowd.

Paulo lunges again and Juvela parries lightly, beating him off just enough to run up the outside of his guard and skewer him in the right shoulder.

He falls back, and salutes her left-handed, lips skinned back from his teeth.

The crier calls the fight then, a technical maiming, and a page carries forth the garland for Juvela. Solomon and I toast the fighters with the rectangular bottle, while the crowd claps. People throw roses and handkerchiefs. Startled pigeons fly up from the surrounding roofs.

"I like to stay until it's all over," I say, when Solomon moves to rise.

Juvela's page helps her to bind up her bad arm and wipe down her blades. When she is put to rights, her patron comes to her, and kisses her upon both cheeks.

"See their faces?" I murmur.

"Yes," says Solomon, but when I look over at him, he is looking only at me.

I take Solomon with me, back to my school-house.

"So this is where you learned to fight," he says.

"This is where I learned to do everything."

The dining hall has been closed up for a year or more, the walls bare of garlands, the banner folded up in a cedar chest in the storeroom. The hall now contains nothing but a long table with a dusty sheet over it. I shove my trousers down past my knees and I sit up on the table.

Solomon steps in close and cups his hands under me, lifting me up against his body. He yanks the tails of his shirt out from between us, so that I can feel the heat of him.

"You're all sinew." He runs a palm up my thigh.

I wind my hands under his shirt and over his belly. "You're not."

"Rich living."

"Indeed." So rich it makes my mouth water. I think of him eating meat and butter, sleeping in fine cotton. Even his coat is new wool, no moth-holes, all of the stitches fine and neat.

"Ready?" He touches me to find out, and brings his fingers to his lips, and then to mine.

.....
After, I lie on my back on the table, and pat the sheet beside me, gesturing for Solomon to lie there too.

"I don't think your table will survive it," he says, leaning against the wall instead. He wipes himself dry with a white handkerchief, and puts his trousers to rights.

And he's correct: when I lever myself up, the dodgy leg of the table folds under, and spills the stained sheet in a crumple to the floor. I almost follow it down as my bad leg cramps.

Solomon catches my elbow, and helps me lower myself. His warm hands knead the scar and the tight muscles around it, while I lounge back against the tilted plane of the tabletop and sip from the bottle.

After a while he slips it from my hand. I'm too sated to bother opening my eyes.

.....
I wake in a slanted rectangle of half-light, with my trousers folded under my head and the drop-sheet twisted around my legs. Silence.

He's gone, then. He left me the bottle. I rinse my mouth with it, and I sit up and slowly dress. My leg straightens with a twinge. I can feel a rosary of bruises forming on my back, where my vertebrae met the table; almost as good as duel-

ling-scars, they are, these autographs of pleasure on my body.

I leave my feet bare. The floor is as clean as my daily sweepings can make it. In the kitchen I drink water from the tap, and I splash some into a glass along with more of the stuff from the bottle.

The rest of it will make a fine meal for the haunts, a rich treat.

They move below the window like dreamers turning in sleep, arms raised lazily. Their mouths catch the whiskey from the air. I pour it out in gouts, watching it sparkle as it falls.

Afternoon lengthens into evening. Hazy shade shifts over the garden. I'd find it peaceful, if it wasn't for all the noise next door. Someone's chopping firewood, or beating a carpet.

Kordelo turns toward the fence, even before I empty the last of the whiskey. His head lolls in a way it never would have done while he lived, unless he was exhausted, or very drunk. He drifts out from beneath the willow, trailing the point of his blade.

The branches of the willow shiver with the impacts of the neighbours' noise. They cannot be cutting my tree. Can they? Its bark has grown thickly around the fence-posts, so that one cannot be felled without the other. I must not let them breach my garden; even the branches shading it must not be cut. I must persuade them. It may mean money. Another finger.

Before I have done more than lift my elbows from the sill, though, I see the flash of steel splinter through the fence, tearing old wood. And again: the wound widens, the new wood bright where the axe lays it open.

My haunts slowly turn to watch, angling their bodies, trailing their winding-cloths, drifting in ones and twos closer to the breach.

I drop my glass. I bolt for the door, and my bad leg twists under me, sending me sideways.

Careening down the stairs, any grace I ever had torn away, I nearly rip the banister from the wall. I burst out into the golden light and round the fence. My bare feet bite into the sod.

Solomon is raising the axe for another blow. I slam into him with my shoulder tucked. We fall in a tangle of limbs and my sleeve tears on the axe-blade.

I wrench it from his hands and toss it down on the roots of the willow. I'm choking. I can't speak.

Solomon sits up slowly, wincing. "Hey. Hey. I'm sorry about your fence, but there were haunts in your garden."

He must see something in the wreck of my face. He raises his hands. "You knew."

Over his shoulder I see the great rending he's made in the fence. I scramble for it, half on my hands. I seize the broken wood on either side and put my face to the gap.

In the garden I see last year's rose canes, goldenrod not yet in bloom, an overturned bucket, a square of bare earth where we used to practice in good weather. A few early bees.

No shades. None of my companions in their winding-sheets.

"They were reaching out for help," Solomon says. "They raised their hands to me. I couldn't just leave them."

"Is that what you saw?" I look back at him; in the striped light under the willow he looks troubled, fearful, and sweaty, and nothing at all like a liar.

They cannot have been reaching out for help. I would have seen it. I know them; I knew them.

They wanted to stay here, just as I do. They loved this place in life. I cannot have been keeping them here unwilling. Can I?

I say none of this, but Solomon's eyes widen. He sits back on his heels on a willow root, and he covers his face.

I limp back upstairs to the east-facing window, even though I know what I will see: just another view of the garden, untenanted.

And now the dead are dead, and I will never know the truth of it.

The next day I sell the remains of the fence and the willow for firewood. A pair of boys with a motorcart come to pick it up. While they take turns splitting and stacking, I sit on the overturned bucket in the garden, watching them. The night was dry, and the earth still smells of spilled whiskey.

I tell the boys to take the broken table, too.

When they're gone, I take the coin they gave me and I walk out to market. My leg is weak,

and my hand throbs. I purchase a pie and a few leathery apples and a bottle of beer, and when I have eaten it all, I walk back.

Solomon is waiting for me, in his long coat, leaning against a very fine automobile.

"Here," he says, offering his hand.

I don't take his hand, but I let some of my weight ease back against the gunmetal polish of the automobile, off my bad leg.

He reaches for my wrist, and fastens a brown leather bracelet around it.

"A favour," he says. "I'd like to be your patron."

"You'd sponsor a duellist who can't fight?"

"I'd sponsor the Flanders Park School," he says.

"It's a poor investment," I say, spreading my hands, gesturing to the shuttered facade, the stump of the willow.

"You're still here," he says. He runs his fingertip over the grafted scar where my finger was. "And I think you might find it easier to attract students now that the place isn't full of haunts."

I cannot strike him. The code forbids it. I can only walk away, as crisply as my leg will let me.

I lose the favour surreptitiously next day, while watching a parade winding downtown in the rain. Later I regret this. I spend an hour searching, but the gutter runs with dirty water and piss, and I never find the favour.

The day after that, a solicitor arrives with Solomon's money. I do not send him away.

I pay a man to sweep the empty rooms and polish all the floors with cinnamon-scented beeswax. I pay a seamstress to mend the banner, and I hang it again in the dining hall.

I am not sure how far Adi Solomon's money is meant to go. The solicitor tells me Solomon has gone to the capital, leaving no message for me.

I am putting away food in the larder when the bell rings. I set down a bag of potatoes and go to answer.

The fellow there is small, a bit less than my own size, with black hair shaved close to his head. He is a duellist. I know before he speaks, by the elegant balance of his weight.

"Alekra?" he says. "I am Georgo." He waits, as if his name should be known to me.

"Of what school?" I ask.

"Of this one, I guess," he says, and he extends

his hand to me, and I see the fresh graft at the base of the smallest finger on his left hand.

By the time Solomon returns from the capital, Georgo has been joined by Karesinda and Miela, and our first four students have enrolled in day classes.

Georgo gets his own room because he is shy and fastidious. Karesinda and Miela share, because they share everything. Georgo knows how to bake bread and pies, and I fill out our menu with soups.

Georgo teaches the younger two students. Miela teaches the older two. Karesinda teaches all four the art of the melee twice a week, and does the accounts. I teach the history and philosophy, except when I have been drinking, and then Karesinda steers me away to the back garden while Miela takes over the lecture.

When Solomon returns, the students have gone home for the evening, so we are all spared the ordeal of introducing the school's patron. I remember spit shining my boots before such an introduction when I was young; Flanders Park School has a way to go before it will pass a spit shine test again.

Still, Solomon is smiling as he gets out of his automobile. He wears no coat now that summer has come, and I see creases in his linen shirt, where it tugs over his belly. He is carrying a parcel wrapped in carmine-red paper. I watch from the window until Georgo comes to fetch me.

I receive Solomon in the salon. We have a salon, now. Solomon sets down the parcel on one of the wingback chairs. He reaches out his hands to me and I grasp them in mine.

His face twists, then. I see his teeth catch the corner of his lip.

"Damn my idiot solicitor," he says, and takes my left hand more roughly, thumbing over the neat grafted scars where my ring finger and middle finger used to be.

Ah.

"It's not about the money," I begin.

"I told him to give you whatever you wanted. An apartment downtown. Introductions. Damn it." And he presses my hand to his lips.

The scars have feeling still, I find. Especially the freshest.

"He sent Georgo here," I point out.

"Because Georgo was the guy who ended up with your little finger," Solomon says. "And I thought he could take over. His record was good, before he was maimed."

"It's even better now," I tell him, and I lead him into the dining hall, where two of Georgo's garlands now hang. And one more, from only two days ago, when Karesinda and Miela took it together in the Midsummer melee.

"Who?" Solomon says. "I don't know either of them."

"You will," I promise him. "They got my other fingers."

He breathes out, and looks away from me. "I wanted to spare you any more scars, Alekra."

He's a civvie, I remind myself. I can't expect him to get this all at once.

I push him back against the new table and run my remaining fingers over his shoulders and down his chest.

"Oh, no," he says. "I remember this table."

"No, this one's new. You bought it."

"I still don't think it's up to my weight," he says, hands reaching under my thighs to lift me up.

"Then buy me another."

The table holds.

The new favour is an earring, with a brown tiger's eye stone dangling from it. Solomon threads it through the piercing in my ear, his big hands sure and gentle.

After he leaves, I pour myself a glass of vinho verde and I sit in the garden. I touch the tiger's eye with the finger and thumb I have remaining on my left hand. It's glossy-smooth, just heavy enough that I can feel the constant little tug on my earlobe, where for years there was nothing.

Instead of finishing my wine, I pour it out onto the earth beneath the rose canes, and the earth drinks it down.

Claire Humphrey lives in Toronto, where she works in the book business, and writes short fiction and novels "mainly about unhappy magicians". Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Crossed Genres*, *PodCastle*, *Fantasy Magazine* and several anthologies. She is also the reviews editor at *Ideomancer*. She can be found online at www.clairehumphrey.ca.

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Webb peered out through the porthole beside his seat, not able to make out much in the green-gray murk. Was that part of a sunken freight barge? It was just a shadow in the shape of the frame of a long low vessel, half buried in the sand.

ILLUSTRATED BY WAYNE HAAG



He glanced around the confining cabin of the submersible amphiboot. Was it really necessary to travel in this creaky, claustrophobic tube? There were nine seats, six of them empty. He and Bassett sat in the first row; farther back was the flabby gray-haired guy snoring with his mouth open: a salvage engineer getting over a bender.

"Bassett," Webb said, "there really wasn't a more expedient way to get to Charleston? I realize there's a lot of flooding, and helicopters are grounded in Stormland, but...the ocean's dangerous too."

Bassett snorted. "Hodey, have you tried to get there *by land*? You might get there, might not. Storms wrecked the roads – only one left and it's barely passable. Freightbots can make it, but people don't try. With this thing – " he waved a hand to include the amphiboot " – we're below the mess, you know? Until we get in close. They got a ramp picked out, they know what works."

It annoyed Webb, being called hodey by Bassett. It was patronizing. Bassett was young, slim, blond, recently tattooed; Webb was late forties, getting sag-faced, and his tattoos were fading.

Hodey was a street term for friend, or friendly acquaintance. Bassett was a hireling, probably trying to seem street-smart. Webb also suspected Bassett had exaggerated his knowledge of Stormland. But Search In Person had been willing to pay for Bassett. And SIP rarely paid for guides. Webb didn't want to go to Charleston without one.

Find your own way, Webb, is what they usually told him.

But not in Stormland.

"Even if you find this prick," Bassett said, "how you going to get his ass out of Stormland? Murderer doesn't want to go with you. You're not regular police. How you going to do it?"

"Not your concern," said Webb. After a moment, realizing he'd let his irritation get the better of him, he added, "I'll have cooperation from Fed PD if I can I.D. the guy for sure."

"We're moving up the slope toward the ramp," said the captain, voice coming thinly from somewhere in the ceiling. "Make sure you're harnessed in, and just relax. Expect some turbulence."

The amphiboot was angling upward, the deck tilting, and then – as it contacted storm turbu-

lence – the boat jarred repeatedly, as if some kid were shaking a bath toy in his tub.

"Shit, that's hard on the stomach," Bassett said.

The vessel ascended to just under the surface, its wheels extruded and gripped the old concrete boat ramp. The shaking eased, settling into a rumbling as the amphiboot rolled up onto the ramp and out of the water, into the open air. The view through the porthole wasn't strikingly different, up here – the air, lashed with spindrift, seemed almost as aquatic as the subsea.

They drove up onto the broken asphalt of the onetime seaside freeway, and headed toward the storm-crashed ruins of Charleston South Carolina.



The engineer was going to the salvage site, north of the city. Webb wondered how they got their salvaged metals out of the area.

The big amphiboot dropped Webb and Bassett off on a dicey overpass, and trundled off with the engineer. The captain wouldn't go any closer to downtown.

This particular storm was ebbing. Standing on the crumbling overpass with Bassett, Webb could see downtown Charleston, a half-mile away, without protective goggles. Rain scratched at a sharp angle across the charcoal sky; clouds roiled like chimney smoke behind the skyline of the ruined city; the wind sang like a sickly choir through the gaps in the skyscrapers. The weather would be uproarious here, most of the time, with Charleston in the center of the eight hundred miles of coastland situated in Stormland: just one of climate change's sore spots; one of civilization's open wounds in the era of extreme weather. It was a region of permanent storms.

Clusters of downtown towers, constructed in the 2020s, were still standing, though some, blotched with recently-evolved surface molds, looked like decayed teeth; others were missing the big sections of high-flexibility layered-graphene, chosen for weather flexibility – some of the windows facing prevailing winds had flexed right out of their frames. About half of the towers were said to be occupied, on the lower floors, but most of the squatters were a mile or so inland,

where they had taken over surviving apartment housing, the deserted mansions and a few still-standing shopping malls. Thousands of refugees had settled in the abandoned city, along with perhaps a hundred employees of salvage corporations. Most of Charleston's Old Town was under water, broken to splinters by the churning sea; between storm surges boats plied between buildings. Webb could see a couple of low-slung motorized catamarans wobbling along, most of them scavenged from the anomalous places they'd fetched up inland, where they'd been deposited by waves and floodwaters.

"We're gonna need one of those catamarans if you want to go to the seaside areas first," Bassett said. He activated an e-cigarette and sucked vapor, blew it into the swirling wind. "I can usually negotiate a ride. Probably going to be safe. I hope. Cannot guarantee no one's gonna try to rob us."

"I'm starting at the seaside, working in," Webb said. "I've got all the stops logged." At least – he hoped – GPS would work here. "Let's do it while the storm's taking a time out. How long we got before the next one?"

"Maybe an hour before it starts in strong again, if we're lucky," Bassett said. "We should hurry. Half-mile to the Floods."

"That's as close as they could get us?"

"They claim it's the best spot. Come on."

Bassett led the way across the overpass, down to an access road, its curbs and bays clogged with debris and trash. They strode south, occasionally kicking a pale plastic sack wrapping itself around their ankles.

It was muggy warm when the wind dropped. Sweat made Webb's shirt stick to his back. The small backpack seemed heavier than it should have, its straps sawing at his shoulders. The twelve-shot .45 autopistol, complete with explosive-round mode, was holstered on his lower back under the yellow slicker. It was a plastic-based weapon – not heavy – but it was insistent.

How was he going to get his man out? No police authority was coming in here to claim the guy. Taking him on a boat, walking a half-mile with him, waiting an indeterminate time with him for the amphiboiat? All with a man who'd killed at least eight people.

Webb felt old.



The air was heavy out here. Like a steamed blanket being drawn across his face, with every lick of wind.

"Had to be a better way to get here," Webb said, waiting with Bassett on the improvised jetty. It was just a heap of concrete slabs jutting into the flood zone.

"No better way on your budget, hodey," Bassett said.

"I'm not your hodey, Bassett," Webb said. "That our ride?"

A dirty-white catamaran was skating toward them like a pond insect, coming with reckless speed between the chimneys of submerged houses, across great stretches of glutinous purplish-green algae, scarcely raising a bow wave as it came through the heavy muck, one of its two hulls lifting up slightly above the other. Just now it was using its patched, mismatched sails, one yellow and one blue. If the wind continued to rise the crewman would probably take the sails in and fire up the engine, Webb supposed. Right now the catamaran had the wind abaft and it was making the most of it.

"Fuel hard to get out here?" Webb asked.

Bassett nodded. "Gas and diesel are. There's only one hydrogen-powered boat I've seen out here and it keeps breaking down. Used to be solar power boats in the old days but now there's not enough sun usually, 'round here, to keep 'em going... I had a brother was a gas diver..."

"What's a...oh. He dives down to sunken cars?"

"Yeah. Sets up a hose to suck out the tanks. He actually specialized in trucks for the diesel. Got crippled up from the bends, though. Long story. He's dead now. Stabbed by a raker in the clinic."

"Sorry."

The catamaran hissed up to the ragged concrete slab, its sails furled themselves, metal masts folded down, and the boat's pilot braked. He was a cadaverous man in a T-shirt so faded the image on it was less than a ghost. He had long gray-streaked red hair, a bristly beard that seemed the product of neglect; his clenched teeth were gapped like the decayed skyline of Charleston.

He gestured impatiently. "Get the fuck on-board this vessel," the pilot said.

"Ha," Bassett chuckled. "Vessel."

He and Webb scrambled aboard the thirty-eight foot boat and weren't really settled into the open area behind the wheel before the pilot put the two engines, one on each hull, in reverse. The boat lurched back against its own momentum and Webb fell on his rump. "Oh. Shit!" The gun had bruised his tailbone.

Bassett didn't offer him a hand. Webb got awkwardly up, clutching at the fiberglass cockpit wall.

"Webb," Bassett said, as the boat turned around past the jetty, "this is Louk. Louk, Webb."

"Trip back, we use the engines," was Louk's only response. "Using fuel. Fifty more."

"That's almost doubling the price," Bassett said. "Twenty."

"Thirty."

They ran on, Louk consenting with his rigid silence. Halfway across the sunken area, with wind butting at them from between the towers in the canalized downtown, Webb was inwardly cursing himself for not bringing an anti-seasickness drug. The boat was bucketing against the oncoming waves and Webb's stomach took every jolt personally.

He was close to throwing up, when suddenly Louk said, "This vessel doesn't go past Building Five there, that big green one. Farthest inland we go."

"Vessel!" Bassett said, jeeringly. "You mean boat! Not hardly a –"

Louk thumbed a button on the wheel that kept them on course, then spun around to point a gun at Bassett's head.

Where, Webb wondered, had Louk kept the gun? He had not a clue the man was carrying a gun. And Louk was only wearing duck pants and a T-shirt.

Bassett gaped. "What the fuck?"

"Say it's a vessel," Louk said.

Webb let his right hand drift back. It suddenly seemed like a long reach to get under that wind-breaker to the .45.

Bassett's Adam's apple bobbed. "Fine. It's a vessel."

"Say it's a vessel," Louk repeated, as if he'd not heard.

"It's a vessel! I said it's a vessel!"

"Say it's a vessel! Say it's a vessel! *Say it's a vessel!*" The third time spraying spittle.

"It's a fucking vessel!" Bassett shouted back.

Louk's gun didn't waver. "Don't reach for that gun, Webb," he said. His eyes didn't waver either. They were locked on Bassett.

Webb put his hand back in front of him. "You're the captain. Of the vessel."

"Yes. I am."

Louk put the gun away, nearly as invisibly as he'd drawn it. It was tucked into his waistband in front, Webb saw. "Bassett. Move up for'ard, keep your hands on the hull where I can see 'em."

Bassett complied.

Louk went back to piloting the boat as if nothing had happened. Twelve queasy minutes later they were in the wet shadows of the high buildings, heading into a flooded, broken-out cavity at the base of one of the older buildings, a dull monolith of concrete and rust-bleeding steel bolts.

Louk tied up, then Webb touched smartbands with him, wrist to wrist, the fee was transferred, and it was time to find their way up to the sky bridge going to the next building west.



They had to take an elevator to the sky bridge.

It was a very old, large, wood-sided freight elevator built in the late 20th century. And they had to pay a man to take them up in it.

The elevator operator was a man in his thirties, wearing a bathrobe over jeans, flip-flops on his feet. His skinny chest was bare under the old blue bathrobe. His clean-shaven face was roughly V-shaped, his red-rimmed brown eyes big and wide, his mouth slack. One of the alae of his nostrils had been cut away, so that side of his nose had a gaping hole; the edge of the wound was still crusted in blood. His hair was dark brown, tucked up in a watch cap. He stood at a panel, his whole job pressing buttons, up/down, open/close. But the elevator was his domicile, Webb saw, looking around; the elevator operator had made it his own apartment. There was a cot with a mélange of blankets to one side, and in the other corner, something that looked and

smelled like a small portable toilet. An old laptop was set up on a plastic crate in another corner, its screen flickering; a folding chair stood in front of the laptop.

"The sky bridge, Sid," Bassett said, pressing himself against the wall in the only space available.

"Who's paying?" Sid asked.

"He is," Bassett said, hooking a thumb toward Webb.

"Trading chits is better," Sid said.

"Trading chits?" Webb asked.

"Never mind, I'll pay it," Bassett said. "You can pay me back later." He tugged some folded slips of printed paper from his pocket, handed one to Sid.

Sid held it out at arm's length to look sharply at it, stuck it in a pocket, and hit the close button. Old steel doors crashed together, with a sound that made Webb's shoulders twitch; the elevator lurched, and ground its way upward, cables squealing. It took longer than walking up a stairway would have.

"How's this thing powered?" Webb asked.

Sid didn't answer. After a moment, Bassett said, "When something's powered here, it comes from wave energy. You'll see the cams later. Some places have some power, sometimes. Lotta others don't."

Sid just stared at his feet, lips moving soundlessly, till they got to the sky bridge floor.



The storm was rising, rocketing clouds past the sky bridge; they roared in their furious hurry. Lightning forked out there, vanished, and reappeared in another spot.

Webb wasn't feeling good about the sky bridge, in this rising storm.

There was another fee, a toll, before they could cross. A man and a woman stood in the way, behind a white-painted waist-high steel fence like something Webb had seen at the stockyards when he was a boy. The woman was about six feet tall, with wide shoulders and thick legs; her crooked six-inch fingernails, painted gold, were folded over the improvised gate. She had a broad Slavic face, black eyes, her long wavy dyed-yel-

low hair tied back. Her blue coveralls were unbuttoned in front to show some cleavage and a tattoo of an angel fish.

The man with her, wearing an old, ill-fitting security guard's uniform, was smallish, raggedly blond, his neck heavily tattooed, right up to the jaw line, with inky blue imagery so overlapping it was indistinguishable.

"Rafe," Bassett said, as they walked up. "Tina. How you kids rollin'?"

"Okay, Bassy," Rafe said.

"So what's the toll here?" Webb asked.

Tina just glowered at Webb and muttered something in an Eastern European tongue.

"She says for you guys, it's twenty," Rafe said, his tone a touch apologetic.

Bassett grunted. "What, just because he looks like he's from outta the storm?"

"Might be a cop or something," Rafe said, shrugging.

Webb tapped his smartband for a twenty and extended his wrist. Rafe tapped smartbands, looked at the result, then nodded to Tina. She effortlessly rolled the big gate out of the way.

Bassett headed off across the sky bridge between the two buildings, and he didn't seem hesitant, so Webb started after him.

Up ahead, the horizontal shaft of the bridge was dripping, at regular intervals, where seams let rainwater in. The structure quivered with every blast of the storm; the scratched-up windows rattled in the orange-painted girders as currents of mist streamed past like whitewater in river rapids. Debris swirled by, whirlwinds of tile and plastic and cardboard.

Webb walked closer to the windows, reasoning the sides might have more structural integrity, and jumped when a blue-white flash of lightning cracked just outside; it was so close he felt the hair on his arms stand up with the charge. The sea, permanently white-capped, churned and wrinkled below; the wet floor trembled and groaned. Lightning flashed just above; electricity sizzled along the sky bridge framework. "Hey - Bassett!" Webb called.

Bassett slowed up and turned. "What?"

"The floor's wet, there's lightning around us -"

"Oh get over it, Webb, you don't think they've grounded it? There're lightning rods all over

Stormland, and all over this thing – runs the power down to storage. They burn out some of the batteries but...just come on.”

“How often you been across this bridge, in a storm like this?”

“Half-a-dozen times. Maybe.”

Or twice? Or once before? Lying son of a bitch.

Webb hurried after Bassett.

The sky bridge moaned, the sky threw a tantrum, and rainbursts shattered on the windows.



“When he killed my daughter,” Paisil said, “he took a long time for that.” Paisil’s Cuban accent clung heavily but Webb decided not to try his own broken Spanish. “We see this, when we find her. We can...we know.”

“You found her yourself?” Webb asked. He shifted on the cot; he sat across from Paisil, who was sitting on the neatly made-up cot his daughter had once occupied.

“Yes...” Paisil nodded. He was a short bandy-legged man with receding curly gray hair. The Cuban refugee looked toward the windows as if wanting to look at the world outside, but they were sealed with taped insulation material, and there was nothing to see. “Yes. I find her.”

They were in the former Global Insurance building, about thirty floors up. The next storm was here, jostling rudely into place like someone cutting into a ticket line, and they had to speak above the shrieking gale outside. The building shuddered and creaked.

The air was close, too warm, and the light was dim. Bassett was standing with his arms crossed, his back against the wall near the open door, unusually quiet. A softer sound ground some of the edges off the wind’s screech: in a corner of the room was a slowly rotating shaft, an adapted girder stretching from a hole in the floor to a hole in the ceiling. It was turned by energy transmitted from the incessant waves eating away at the remains of Charleston. The shaft, passing through the whole building, had been added by the squatters. Shafts like this were how some of the squatters survived – the power it generated traveled through underwater cables to dry land, and went inland to energy brokers.

Squatters sent appropriated freightbots, on the single remaining road out of Stormland, to pick up supplies paid for by energy credits. The freightbots made it back intact often enough. Scavenging was another source of relative abundance. Freight containers washed up, sometimes crammed with food or medical goods. There were a few fish that could be caught – but the glut of enormous jellyfish and toxic blooms promoted by global warming had wiped out a great many species.

Webb hesitated, then asked, “Mr Paisil – did he leave her with her arms twisted around her neck? I’m sorry to...”

The reply came out as a croak. “Yes.” Paisil looked at the solar lamp hanging from the water-stained ceiling. “Broken arms, around... I’m sorry I bring her to this place. But, free living here. Stay a while, store up some things worth money, move inland, they say. Free home here. Not so good.”

“And the man who saw the killer go down the stairs – he said the killer was...?” Webb didn’t want to ask a leading question.

“No one he sees before. The man who kill her, his skin very light, his eyes squinting. His hair yellow.”

“Clothing?”

“Mechanics, what you call...”

“Coveralls?”

“Yes. Dirty and blue.”

“Can I speak to the man who saw this?”

“Already I ask him. He won’t talk to you.”

“The murderer didn’t say anything, as he passed? Didn’t speak?”

“No. Did not speak. My friend had shotgun, so the man just walk by. My friend, he doesn’t know my daughter is hurt. So...he lets him go.”

“No notion how he came to pick your daughter?”

Paisil shook his head. “No. He didn’t say... why...he kill her. I should not have brought her.”



“Some do better than others here,” Bassett said as they went down the stairs, Bassett leading with a small flashlight in hand. The concrete stairwell made the rising storm-winds boom

like shots echoing in an enormous cannon; the flashlight illuminated random sections of stairs that seemed to float alone in space. "I did pretty good, selling fresh water to different squat colonies. But I don't like to stay too long."

"How far is the clinic?"

"This same building but a long ways down. One floor above the water. I keep telling them they need to move it up one, because that floor's getting undermined by the waves."

This appearance of charitable concern on Bassett's part surprised Webb. "You get some help there?"

"My brother did. Some comfort from 'em I guess. Some shit like that."

He seemed embarrassed and increased the speed of his descent so that Webb had to hurry, almost stumbling.

"So," Webb asked, puffing, "most of the people being helped at this clinic were injured by storms? Debris, or...what?"

"Lots of them. Lot of rakers too. Like that crazy fucker Louk."

"Was that his issue?"

"Blown raker. Sure. Rake and that new synthy smack they got, those're the drugs around here. Plus lots of homebrew booze."

They descended, floor after floor; at the fifth landing they passed a man sleeping on cardboard, next to a small boy who was eating a vividly colored breakfast cereal from a box with his fingers.

Down and down. At the floor just above the water, they went through a dented metal door, and along a hallway to the right. The spongy carpet was torn up in places, in others darkly discolored by reeking mold. The walls were draped by rusty water marks. Several people hunkered on plastic tarps outside a door at the end of the hall, waiting for beds inside. One of them, a man with long brown hair and beard, had a bloodied bandage covering his eyes.

"There it is," Bassett said. "Stormland Volunteers Clinic."

They walked up to the door, labeled with an outdated sign: *Resident Health Spa*.

The door was opened, just as they got there, by a tall man in a grubby white sports jacket and green trousers. He was a long-faced man, his

head shaved, his graying beard cut short; he had a heavy, pronounced jaw, watery blue eyes, an elastic smile. "Got room for you, Mr Scott," he said. He had a deep, languid voice.

The man with the bloodied bandage over his eyes said, "Oh!" and stood up. "Thanks Gerald."

Gerald helped the blinded man through the door. Then he glanced at Webb and Bassett. "Gentleman, I'd tell you to take a number but we're out of numbers too. Have a seat."

"Gerald," Bassett said, "we're not patients. Webb's here to talk to Lottie."

"I see!" Gerald looked Webb over. "You look like a cop."

Webb shook his head. "You have cops here?"

"Not usually. You *used* to be a cop?"

"You have a good eye. I used to be. Not here to bother any of your patients. Just need a word with Lottie."

"Well - come in, but try not to upset her."

Lit by pools of light under dangling Coleman lamps, was a hodgepodge of bedding: futons, bunk beds, cots, mattresses, even a few open sofa-beds, all of them occupied. Some of the wider beds had two patients in them. The room smelled of blood, rot, seawater and antiseptics, in equal measure. It looked to Webb like the room had been some kind of large office suite at one point, probably full of cubicles.

"What's up with that white jacket, Gerald?" Bassett asked. "Playing doctor?"

Gerald chuckled. "Not that kind of playing and not that kind of coat. But it seems to make people feel a little better if I wear something white, like I know what I'm doing."

"Where's Harrington?"

"Doctor's sick. Down with that Dengue again."

"Dengue fever?" Webb asked, as they wended past several sets of bunk beds containing bruised, whispering children. He knew tropical diseases had moved north, but he thought that one needed lots of mosquitoes. "I'm surprised the mosquitoes survive that constant wind blasting outside."

"Right," Gerald said. "Outside! But see, half of the buildings in Charleston are sumps, really, now. There's water, rainwater and everything else, in the lower floors. And the mosquitoes find their way in there. Lots of them came from before the storms got to be a permanent thing."

I've just finished a new round of vaccinations but there's always some mutation that slips past the vaccine and that's what the doc's got... We got some new antivirals in, though, seem to be helping him, he might be back tomorrow... I'm saying a prayer for him."

Webb noticed a flickering around Gerald's head. Beads of silver caught the light, and were gone. But then it doubtless wasn't strange for people to have probation flyers watching them here.

"Here's Lottie," Gerald said.

A dark woman who might be in her mid-thirties sat on a cot against a back wall near a curtained window; the heavy off-white curtains were duct-taped over the window frame. Her hair was dyed auburn, showing black near the roots. Wearing a fading blue shift and no shoes, she sat bent over a magazine.

She looked up as they came near. Her round, mixed-race face seemed to sag with fatigue.

"Lottie, this man would like a word, if it's okay with you," Gerald said.

She wrinkled her nose, peering over reading glasses. She didn't speak. The wind cracked and rattled behind her, as if articulating something she left unspoken.

"My name is Cyrus Webb. Are you Lottie Hadad?"

She nodded.

"I'm a detective. Not the police kind. I understand you lost your sister?"

She nodded, staring at him.

A woman groaned, somewhere in the room, and Gerald said, "I'll leave you to this, Mr Webb. We'll talk, but I've got to see to Mrs Chiang."

Gerald bustled off. Lottie looked after him. "He's the one," she said. Her voice was hoarse.

Webb raised his eyebrows. "The *one*?"

"The one kind man here. I mean, really *kind*. You know? He's the kindest man I've met in this place. The sweetest guy for a hundred miles around. And I been up and down this coast."

"Yeah? A regular saint?"

"If he's not here, helping Dr Harrington, he's somewhere else, taking food to people, talking to people. Trying to make them feel better."

"That's true," Bassett said, almost grudgingly. "He works tearing out old copper from bust-

ed machines, sends it on the freightbot. Then he jumps right into doing stuff for people, no charge. I've seen him, oh, for three years, helping out in every part of Stormland."

"When the Civic Center collapsed on all those people staying there," Lottie said, "he was the first there, stayed longest, sat with people dying. He dug and dug in the rubble till he just fell over from being worn out."

"How'd the building collapse?" Webb asked.

"Weather stress," Bassett said. "Storm pressure. Wind. Corrosion. All that shit. What else?"

"He came over when I found Ginia. He put his arm around me and let me cry like I was an idiot. We just sat there for hours."

"About Ginia – when you found her was she... Any particular arrangement of her body?"

"She had her arms all busted and purple and wrapped around her neck like...she was strangled with broken arms..." Lottie's lips trembled. Her eyes teared up.

"Any notion how long she'd been dead?" Webb asked gently.

Lottie shook her head.

"Anything else you can tell me about what you found?"

"There was semen on her thigh. Most of the blood was up higher."

Webb nodded. "Did you notice blood on her fingernails?"

"Yes. I don't want to... That's enough." She bent over her magazine again and pretended to read.

"Where did you get an actual printed magazine?" Bassett asked.

"I found it in an old bathroom," Lottie said, not raising her eyes from the magazine. "It's twenty years old. I like to read about the celebrities. Nobody seemed all that worried..."

The endless storm howled from beyond the glass.

Webb patted Lottie on the shoulder, then turned and looked for Gerald. He saw him across the room, and started for him – and stopped short, noticing a man lying on his side, in the bottom bunk bed, partway across the room. The man was in dirty blue coveralls. He had blond hair and his eyes were compressed in a squint. He was staring into space.

Really? Was that him, just lying there?

Bassett caught up with Webb. "Where you going now, Webb?"

"Was going to ask Gerald about something..." Webb paused a dozen steps from the man curled up on the bunk, and held Bassett back with touch of his hand. He lowered his voice. "That guy there, you know him?"

"The guy in the..." Bassett looked. "Sorta like the man Paisil mentioned..."

"Had the same thought. I take it you don't know him."

"Nope. Looks like a raker to me."

"How do you know? The staring?"

"The squint. See, if you do raker a lot, it makes you squint and finally you can't stop. Some people binge and they squint while they're bingeing, but if they keep on..."

"So, that squint that Paisil mentioned – doesn't mean the guy's eyes were like that naturally."

"Nah. You going to arrest him?"

"I have to do tests and...I have to play it by ear. Now shut the fuck up. You're talking too loud."

Webb walked over to the man on the bunk. "Hi," Webb said, smiling, putting his hands in his pocket. "I'm new here. Cyrus Webb. Who'd you be?"

The man looked up at him. His hands, clutched up close to his chest, clenched and unclenched. But he didn't say a word. He seemed a long, long distance from speaking. Thousands of miles.

Webb reached out, gently shook the man's shoulder. "Say, uh...hodey. Can we have a word?"

No response – except from Gerald, hustling up to them. "You won't get anything out of Mr Blythe, there's no point in shaking him."

"His name is Blythe?" Webb ran his mind back through the list of possible suspects, from the D.C. area, and didn't come across that name. But that didn't prove anything.

"Leonard Blythe. He's an engineer. He hooked up with some rakers and just did a hit too much. You know, you can go a long time on it but if you do that one too many..."

"You use rake, Gerald?"

"No. Never. I *know* it though, when I see it – we get a lot of people in here. If it's not overdose, they hurt themselves in some kind of psychotic episode. Or get shot when they're too belligerent."

Webb glimpsed that flickering bead-shape

near Gerald again. "Can I talk to you in private somewhere, Gerald?"

"Yes, I have a few minutes. There's something I want to talk to you about, too. We can go to the doctor's cubby. Far corner over there."

Webb turned to Bassett. "Could you kind of keep an eye on our friend Mr Blythe here?"

"Hodey, I'm not a –"

"I know you're not. And I'm not your hodey. Just tell me if he decides to go anywhere, that's all."



The 'clinic cubby' was the one remaining office cubicle, and Gerald sat down behind a desk piled high with a fairly random selection of medications in little boxes and bottles. Webb sat on a crate propped on end across from him.

"Gerald – that man Blythe answers the description of a man seen leaving the scene of a murder."

"Does he? Which murder?"

"The Paisil girl."

Gerald grunted. "In a storeroom just below the roof of that building a rake dealer has his set-up. Man named Crewsky. I wish you'd take Crewsky away, along with whoever else you want to take away."

"You're saying Blythe was up there with Crewsky, buying his rake, is all?"

"Most likely."

Something was bothering Webb, actively nagging at him. It was Gerald's pronounced jaw. A real jutter. Hadn't he seen something like that in a police computer sketch, jutting out of a hoodie?

"Gerald...I should tell you why I'm here."

Webb watched Gerald's face closely as he went on. "In the Washington D.C. area, about thirteen years ago, a man killed a number of young women. He strangled them and had sex with the bodies. The killings stopped and we think he moved out of the area. Now, I'm with an outfit called Search In Person. We were hired by the father of one of those young women. Dad has a lot of money and he's out to find the guy who killed his little girl."

"Understandable," Gerald said, nodding.

"We've had word that killer may be operating here – in Charleston. There have apparently

been four strangulations of young women here, possibly a fifth, and normally we wouldn't know about it when it's in Stormland. But someone got word through to us. Anonymously...but he sent a good deal of information that fit right in with what we had."

He kept watching Gerald's face, hoping to see some flicker of fear, some indication...

"Right," Gerald said, nodding patiently.

Webb cleared his throat. "So – one thing we *do* have is a DNA sample from the D.C. Strangler. It doesn't match anyone in police records. But I have some equipment with me..." He took off his backpack, and as he did it he discreetly loosened his gun in its holster. "I have a DNA tester right here." Webb drew out a simple glass cylinder about the size of a standard syringe, with all its intricacy hidden inside it. "This is the very best, latest, nanotester, Gerald. Expensive and accurate. My plan is to test as many people as I can. Starting with this Blythe."

But right after Blythe, Webb figured, he'd test Gerald, if he had to sit on the guy to do it. Great cover for a psycho killer, being the kindest man anywhere in the area. Helping run a clinic. Knowing where most everybody was, what everyone did...

"There's no harm in you testing Blythe," Gerald said, his elastic smile seeming a bit sad now. "But he won't be the man you're looking for – he's not the one who's killing people here."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because if you're comparing DNA to the man who killed those people in Washington – that would be me, not Blythe. As you'll find when you test me. I was the D.C. strangler."

Webb stared. He wondered if Gerald was about to lunge at his throat. But Gerald sat back in his seat, relaxed and calm.

Webb reached behind him and, very carefully, drew his gun from under his coat. Gerald looked at the gun and his smile became wider – and sadder. "I'd have that ready now, too, if I was in your place. But I'm not going to hurt you, or anyone else. And I'm not the man who's killed the girls in Stormland."

Webb didn't point the gun – he kept it on his lap, under his hand. Ready. "You're the killer – but you're not the killer?"

"I'm not any sort of killer now. I was once the D.C. Strangler. You know – we have a semen sample from the killer here. From the body of Lottie's sister... I took the sample. It's in a drawer, right here, in a vacuum unit. Should be still valid for your DNA tester. You won't find my DNA in that particular sample though."

Webb shook his head. "This is not fitting together."

"It will." Gerald looked at the ceiling, as if the memory were replaying there. "I was a medical student, in Georgetown. I killed those girls in D.C., but – I wanted to stop. Finally I turned myself in and the Justice Department took me off the street. They never announced the arrest – they wanted to use me in their Prevention Studies program. I was a guinea pig. They're looking for a way to prevent serial killers, you see. Do you know what Frontal Lobe Behavioral Modification is?"

Webb cleared his throat. "Ah...yes. In a general way. In clinical trial for hospitalized people – certain kinds of schizophrenics...and psychopaths. Stem cells?"

"Right. They inserted stem cells into certain areas in the front of my brain, activated them with electro-stimulation, cell-seeding chemistry and...well, the frontal lobe contains higher brain functions that keep people from acting out on every impulse, keeps them from certain kinds of delusions. People need something called 'mirror neurons' for emotional and cognitive empathy. They had to insert those too, and activate them in me..." He looked rueful. "It was through the Johns Hopkins Neural Anticipation clinic – you should call Johns Hopkins directly. There's a cable you can use, just above the water, down below. We've got a pretty good interface set up. Ask the clinic for Dr Philip Clemence. Tell him you know about my history. He'll confirm all this – they think they have a cure for serial killers. And I think they truly *do*, Cyrus. I am not at all the same person I was. Not at all. Back when I was acting out I had some little flicker of conscience – that's why I turned myself in – but I had no lasting self-control. I'd have killed again, on my own. Now...it's night and day. And it's no longer night for me."

Webb snorted. "And I'm supposed to just...?"

"No. You can take me in, if you want. But there's something I need to help you do first. I am the one who called you here, Cyrus."

"You called me here?"

"I'm the anonymous source. The police wouldn't come here. I wanted someone to come and take care of the man who's hurting women here, you see. I can't take him out on my own – and I haven't got the portable DNA testers you have, to prove anything. I needed you. I did some research...and your agency has the financial motivation to come here, when no one else would, so, I left the trail of crumbs, in my message to them. I was a bit ambiguous. It's genuinely *not me*, killing these girls here, you see. But I know who it is. At least I'm pretty sure. Takes one to know one, if you like. I never broke my victims' arms, however...that was *his* idea."

Webb glanced at the flickering bead orbiting Gerald's head. "Those flyers... They're not probation observers?"

"Yes and no. I *was* convicted. But quietly. This is my sentence, being here in these circumstances. I love it here! My friends there make it possible." He glanced up at the three tiny silvery beads orbiting his head, barely visible. "In fact, the hospital put those beads on me. They watch me, watch my brain activity. Every night I download their data, into this – " he took a small silvery domino-shaped instrument from his pocket – " then I upload onto the cable. Stormland is where I could do the most good. And I have a lot to make up for..."

Webb shook his head numbly. "You can't just... *make up* for those murders."

"I know I can't. Still – there's a sense in which it wasn't quite my fault. Even though we have to hold people responsible for what they do. I was born with brain damage, of a certain specific kind. Some serial killers are damaged in the course of their childhoods. Others, like me, in the womb... It's complicated. In my case, it was a cerebral birth defect. My mother was a methedrine addict. The drugs damaged my frontal lobe. Growing up, I couldn't really feel a connection with people, you see...but I felt compelled to make one, any way I could. Hurting them, all that I did – that gave me a kind of...of artificial connection with them, for a few minutes. That's

how it felt to me." He let out a long, soft sigh.

"You could be bullshitting me. And the semen sample you have might not be the right one."

"But it is. You can confirm that when I take you to the man... I think he'll show his true colors, if we insist. I pity him. But I can't let him go on and I doubt we can get him into the program. Now...would you like to find an interface? Goes down to an old trans-Atlantic cable. Please – call Dr Clemence. I'll give you a name at the FBI, too. Just so we can get our priorities straight."

Webb looked down at his gun. "Jesus. Does this mean I have to go back over that sky bridge?"

"Yes. I'm afraid it does."

"Shit."



"What floor you want?" Sid asked, as they walked into the freight elevator.

"Just five floors up, Sid," Gerald said affably. He handed Sid a trading chit.

Sid clashed the elevator doors shut and they lurched upwards.

"You been using the call cable?" Sid asked.

"Yes, Mr Webb has, Sid. He confirmed some things I told him. And in fact he's here to talk to you. He just wants to test your DNA. To see if it matches some we found on Ginia."

Sid gaped at them. Webb drew the little glass cylinder from his windbreaker pocket, and his hand on the gun in its holster, under his coat. "Won't hurt a bit."

Sid suddenly stopped the elevator, jolting it to a halt on the wrong floor, so that Webb almost fell over. The door was opening behind him.

Webb drew his gun – Sid rushed past, knocking into Webb with his shoulder as he went.

Webb staggered back, turned, fired the gun. It spat. He missed Sid, who was running down a hall to the left, but the bullet struck the plaster-board wall just behind him.

Gerald hissed, "Don't hit the button, Webb – "

But Webb had already hit the button that made the little bullet explode, and the wall opened up in a small fireball – which was immediately sucked out into the screaming storm outside.

An oval opening, about five feet high and three across, had opened in the wall between girders.

Sid stopped, realizing the hall ahead of him was blocked by old debris. He turned and looked at Webb, who aimed the gun.

"Come back here, Sid. Next one won't miss."

Sid stared – he looked at the hole in the wall. The storm outside shrieked a demand. Webb glimpsed spray and irregular sheets of construction plastic whirling by outside.

"Sid!" Gerald yelled. "There's a program! Maybe –"

Sid turned and dived through the opening, headfirst out into the storm.

Webb rushed to the wall, crouched, looked outside. He could see Sid, caught up in a tornado-sized waterspout, along with gray fragments of rubbish, his arms twisting around his neck, bones breaking as he spun, twisted, into the sea...



"I'm sorry, but – he took the last boat," Gerald said, coming in. "Until the worst of this storm's over."

"That's just like Bassett. The son of a bitch."

Gerald came to stand beside him. They were looking out the window of an old conference room on the twelfth floor, watching the storm, rising to a fevered pitch, a delirious meteorological frenzy, hammering at the buildings, ripping off sections of thick polystyrene from the outer walls. The catamarans were all tucked away in their hiding places. There would be no rides out that way for many hours...

Webb snorted. "You really think the sky bridge is going to last through this?"

"No, probably not."

"And this building?"

"It's solid. It's been through a lot. We reinforce it too. After this one abates some, we can go inland, see what's there. Maybe you can hop a freightbot, or you can meet the amphibobot, but it's hard to say if it's going to be back for a while, after this one. Probably wreckage all over the landing ramp."

Webb growled to himself. "Going back after giving them that story..." He shook his head. "It's not right for me to collect my paycheck anyway. You were caught a long time ago. I should've told

them that."

"I think you did the right thing, for the girl's father, telling them that Sid was their man."

Webb shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"Hard to be sure. I don't know what's right, except try to help. That's all I'm sure of. Just try to help."

Webb grunted skeptically. "How long will this storm last?"

"It's a hurricane. Maybe...a week?"

"Oh Jesus fucking Christ."

Gerald showed his elastic smile. "But you know, since you're here, and you used to be a cop, and we don't have one... There's Crewsky to think of. And other things. You could be a big help. You might just want to stay here. Where you're needed."

"Blown here like a piece of goddamn debris."

"Do you have family to go back to?"

"Not in any way that... I have a grown son, who's not particularly friendly. An ex-wife. So – not really. Not even a dog. But...I'd be stupid to stay here. Just – stupid."

Gerald nodded amiably. "I suppose that would be stupid. Yes."

Webb swore softly to himself. "I might as well try to be of use, if I'm going to be here. I mean – for now."

"Sure. If you're going to be here..."

"Gerald – shut up. Let's see if there's something to eat in this place."

"Right this way..."

They went back to Gerald's place, above the clinic, and ate some canned food.

John Shirley is the author of numerous novels and short story collections. His science fiction work includes the seminal urban fantasy *City Come a Walkin'* and the *A Song Called Youth* cyberpunk trilogy. He won the Bram Stoker Award for his story collection *Black Butterflies*. His latest story collection is *In Extremis: The Most Extreme Short Stories of John Shirley*. Shirley was co-screenwriter of *The Crow* and wrote the lyrics for numerous Blue Oyster Cult songs, and for his own recordings. His newest novels are *Everything is Broken* (Prime Books), and *Doyle After Death* (HarperCollins) which we'll be reviewing next issue. PM Press recently brought out the book *New Taboos* for its Outspoken Authors series, which you can read more about in this issue's Book Zone interview.

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TRANS-SIBERIA

AN ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY

with added notes from *The Cautious Traveller's Guide to Greater Siberia*
by L. Girard (Mauriac Publishing, Paris, 1859)



*The sole means of passage across the Greater Siberian wastes is by train,
for those who can afford the ticket, and the risk.*

I left Beijing at seventeen, carrying a box of pencils and a suitcase held together with rope. At the station families sobbed and embraced. I tried not to look. Nor did I let my eyes widen at the size of the train, its wheels as tall as a man's shoulder, the iron bars over the windows as thick as my arm. The green paint was faded, but the gold lettering on the carriages still stood out: Beijing to Moscow.

My breath caught in my chest.

Armed guards checked my Chinese papers and the letter of invitation from the Paris Conservatoire des Arts. I was handed waiver forms by representatives of the Trans-Siberia Company, releasing them from any responsibility for my safety and any guarantee of our eventual arrival in Moscow. I kept my expression blank because I was a man now and I could not be afraid.

But my hand shook as I affixed the seal bearing my name. Red ink smeared the paper.



The great train of the Trans-Siberia Company (est. 1800) crosses the border wall two hundred miles from Beijing. It is three thousand miles to Moscow. The journey takes seven days.

The greater part of the train was the so-called cattle-sheds, carriages partitioned by a dozen thin walls, three bunks clinging to either side. I squeezed onto my top bunk, so close to the carriage roof that I was able to sit only if I hunched my shoulders and lowered my head, for all that I was small and slight. But up there, at least, I was away from all the nervous voices, raised as if to ward off gathering fears.

On the bunks below were loud, quick young men from the south, with sunburnt skin. They splashed sweet-smelling liquor into chipped glasses and rummaged in their bags to produce parcels of nuts, dried fruit, packs of cards. One took out a crumpled photograph and smoothed it on his knee, propping it up against the window, and the others whistled and shouted such things as the aunties at the orphanage would have had the skin off my buttocks for even thinking.

I peered down, to see a grainy picture of a woman, her silk *qipao* slit up to her thigh, her lips full and dark in her pale face. She stared right up at me. I looked away.

"To keep us company through the long nights, my friends!" They laughed and crashed their glasses together.

One glanced up at me. "She doesn't bite, countryman. Come and join us in a drink to her fine health!"

I muttered my excuses and curled back into my bunk.

"Maybe not to his taste," came the whisper from below, and a wave of raucous laughter.

A familiar, empty feeling sat heavy in my gut. I will climb down, I told myself. I will pour their liquor down my throat, roar out meaningless, terrible words like a man should do, take up their picture and hold it to my lips. I will not be afraid. Here, on this train, I will make myself new, make myself into a man. Climb down, I said.

I didn't climb down. I lay on my stomach and stared out between the bars of the window as the low, ornate buildings of Beijing gave way to the farmsteads of the borderlands. The train trav-

elled slowly. Slowly enough to see the farmers' faces as they straightened up from their work to watch us pass. Some of them took off their hats.

In Greater Siberia it is believed that the shadows have faces. In the deep forests yellow eyes watch the train.

We crossed the border at night. The carriage slept at last, rattling and snoring along the shuddering rails but I lay wide awake, watching the window for the last lights to blink out. A final settlement, then the lights of the border wall, then nothing at all but the empty lands.

When I closed my eyes there were things in the darkness. Things just outside the window. Things formed out of rumours and half-heard stories. Whispering, creeping things. They crowded closer until I swore I could hear their long fingers at the glass.

I woke, shaking. No sleep for me. Instead, I crept from the cabin and made my way to the dining car with my sketch book. Paper and pencils. Safety in shadows and lines.

But my hopes for solitude were shattered. Every lamp in the dining car burned, every table crowded with travellers, with laughter and music and sweat.

I squeezed myself into the nearest seat. I was good at being small, good at passing unnoticed. Taking out my book, I tried to calm my breathing, to banish the movement and noise and lose myself in the familiar hush that seeing – really seeing – always brought; a gemstone earring as it brushed against a neck, the puckering of skin around a scar, the dark strands of a braid of hair. How the lights caught the gold embroidery on women's dresses, how they lit their reds and purples from within and there in the dark glass of the windows we were all doubled, both within the train and without.

A woman in blue caught my eye. I traced the curve of her neck, the curl of her dark hair. The blue stones around her neck were deep and watery, her skin untouched by rouge. All around her men snatched greedy, stolen glimpses, but no-one approached her. She was more alone than anyone here. I bent my head closer to the page.

A voice in my ear. "Do we scare you so much?"

My pencil skittered, drawing a line across her cheeks. I looked up into dark blue eyes and I was lost for words, as always, though the aunties beat me and told me *Speak, boy, or are you as foolish as you look?*

She gestured to the page. "Faces, trinkets, hair. We are more than this, you know."

Her tone was serious but her eyes merry. She spoke in French, the common tongue of Europe, still unfamiliar on my own tongue then, though I had spent many hours over my books. So many words needed, to say so little. I felt the flush deepening on my face.

"I...I am a student, only," I managed. I could not hold her eye but looked down at my paper and twisted my pencil around and around in my fingers, waiting for her to leave.

She didn't leave. She sat down beside me, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands, and watched me as I began to draw again. She was so close that her hair brushed against my cheek.

"They are beautiful," she said, "your sketches."

I told her, slowly, haltingly, that I would go to study in Paris on a scholarship. I told her that I was lucky, luckier than I could ever have imagined.

"Orphans need to be lucky," she said. "They have to make their own luck."

When I looked up, quickly, she laughed at my expression.

"You can tell," she said. "You can tell the ones who travel lightly."

Orphans have to make their own luck. They have to find their own places. I have always remembered this.

"My name is Elena," she said.

"I am no-one," I said. "My family name is Wu, which means 'nothing', and is what all the orphans are called. My given name is Gulou, which means Drum Tower, and is where I was found, before the aunties took me in."

She looked at me for so long that my skin began to feel tight and funny. Then she smiled, a great big smile, and said, "Well that is a name to be proud of."

And I think, for the first time, I was.

I drew. She watched. The train hurtled through the darkness and I forgot all about the things outside.

Some travellers say that the cost of the train is much higher than just the ticket. They say that there is another price, unique to every traveller.

I slept until the morning was almost over and when I opened my eyes she was my first thought. Elena. Her name was Elena. She thought my sketches were beautiful.

The landscape had moved in closer during the night. Outside the window trees clustered so near that they brushed the glass, and greenish underwater light filtered into the train.

I watched for her all day, half hopeful, half scared, not letting myself look at last night's work, afraid that I would not have captured her as I hoped, that under my pencils she would have faded to a poor shadow of what she was. Instead, I sat in the dining car and ate food I couldn't pronounce, found the observation carriage, all glass and iron bars, where there were ladies in silks and men who talked too loudly. And I looked up at every rustle of skirts and every whispery, sibilant murmur of French.

Once, a thump came from the roof above, and to cries from my fellow passengers I looked up to see through the bars an orange eye amidst feathers and scales, great claws and wings spread wide. A lady beside me swooned, carefully.

But I forgot to be scared. I forgot because all I could think was how beautiful those wings were, pale purple and laced with red veins. How beautiful horror could be.

That night before I slept I turned at last to my book. To Elena and her voice in my head saying, "You have nothing to be afraid of."

Yet as my eye fell upon the pages, I could not stop myself from crying out. The book dropped from my hands.

Impossible. Impossible. Perhaps I was more tired than I knew. Perhaps the journey had played on my nerves. Shaking, I picked it up again. I blinked, but the pictures remained. Not the face I remembered but something else entirely. A strange, clawed, twisted thing with dark, inhuman eyes.

I slammed the book shut. When I slept, it was to troubled dreams.

In this region grows an interesting genus of fir tree,

identifiable by its red-tipped needles and sap. The tree is said to appear to be bleeding. The remains of human settlements can also still be seen, long deserted.

The aunties told us the world is unkind. They told us to rely on ourselves alone. They said that this would make us strong, that fear was for children.

When I was afraid, I took out my pencils. I drew things to show they couldn't hurt me. I drew the older boys as they slept because in sleep they were gentle. And the aunties, as we studied they would let their faces fall slack, when they thought we weren't looking. They would turn old before my eyes and I would be less afraid.

But here, in the midst of the wastelands, I had lost even this small solace. I feared some twisting of the brain. Something broken. Elena must have seen what I created, she must think me a monster. I tore out the pages of my book, kept them hidden against my skin. I feared my madness could be seen by others.

Outside the window the trees wept red tears. We passed a wooden church, alone on a low hill. The roof was caved in, the whole structure leaning, tilted by the wind. There were no windows.

Never stopping, on and on across the continent. Never stopping, the only way to be safe.

"Safe-ish," the mutters went, the jokes. "Safer."

But not yet saved.

On the third day we slowed perilously close to walking pace, the track winding through still lakes whose surfaces did not reflect the sky. I stood, nose to the window, rapt and appalled by the non-colour of the water, if that is what it was, and the scuttering, scuttling things, carapaces shining and black.

And in the midst of it all, yellow flowers, a cluster of fragile petals around a central cup, green tendrils creeping upwards. I peered closer, amazed that nature so delicate could exist here, and thrive. But as I watched, something fleshy and red shot out from the flower cup towards a creeping, thorny creature. A flickering tongue; it grasped the creature and pulled it towards those pale petals, faster than I could have believed, and the petals opened, and the teeth were revealed. Row upon row. Sharp and shining.

I stumbled backwards. Other tongues darted out, quick as snakes.

"The flowers are hungry," said a voice beside me. "Like everything here is hungry."

Elena. I had not seen her since that first night. In the daylight she seemed more real, more earthly. How could I have captured so twisted a likeness? The wrongness was within myself. I could not meet her eye.

"Where is your sketchbook?" she asked, standing beside me and watching the terrible, greedy flowers. "Such rare things deserve preserving, too."

I shook my head, still unable to look at her. "I thought..." I began.

"That you had found something beautiful?" she said.

"No," I said. "Something that I didn't have to be afraid of. But I was wrong."

We stood in silence for a while, as the train picked up speed again, to its familiar rattling, rolling pace. Finally Elena said, "Well then, that just confirms my conclusions."

I turned to her. "Your conclusions?"

"That you, Monsieur Orphan," she said, "may have been found in a drum tower, and may be prone at times to self-pity –" (this with raised eyebrows) "– but are nonetheless possessed of common sense, a most underrated gift."

I could not resist laughing.

"If you are not afraid of everything outside this train," she went on, "then you are a foolish man."

She put her hand on my arm, and I am happy to tell you that I did not stammer, or blush, or lower my eyes, but stood, contented and unfoolish.

A strange sensation! And strange that it should be here, in this unknown land, with this unknown, blue-eyed woman.

.....
If anything unusual occurs, remain calm. Return to your cabin immediately and lock the door. Stuff your ears with wax, or cloth if no wax is to hand. Make as little sound as possible. Keep an upright position, your back against the wall and your eyes open. Keep your pistol in your hand.

By the fourth day a kind of patient inertia had gripped the train. We became used to waiting

our turn for the washrooms and trying to keep clean in the one tiny sink in each carriage. We became familiar with the dining car and the same diet of cured meat, bread and olives every day. We learned how best to propel ourselves down the corridors to the swaying rhythm of the train, when best to close the curtains against the approaching night and the shadows outside that moved alongside us with eerie grace. We learned not to look.

On the fifth night the lights went out.

I was in the observation car, my sketchbook open on my lap, no longer afraid of what may appear beneath my pencils. A few other travellers shared the car, talking or playing cards, for the most part. They left me alone. They thought me dull and awkward, unable to joke or boast or flirt.

Elena entered. I knew her by the rustle of her skirts, the way she hesitated in the doorway. She sat down beside me and opened her book. We had taken to sitting like this, in companionable silence. It was a relief, not to need words.

I was about to pick up my pencils again when we were plunged into darkness. We reacted with no more than an intake of breath. No-one spoke. No-one moved. We sat in darkness such that I had never known, with no sound at all but the rails beneath us.

It felt like an age, but could only have been a matter of minutes before the lights came on again and we all looked at each other and burst into nervous laughter.

"Nothing to worry about!" cried someone.

"These things happen," said someone else, "quite normal, I'm sure."

One of the ladies drew a shuddering breath and began to sob.

Elena stood up. "Come," she said, "quickly." She took my hand and led me out of the carriage, down corridors where worried faces peered around doors and guards shouted for calm.

Her urgency scared me more than the darkness had.

"Listen." She stopped. We were alone in the space between two carriages, where a samovar bubbled away and a couch for the guard was tucked up against the wall. One dim bulb above us flickered.

"There's something here." She looked around, her eyes midnight blue in the dim light. She took both of my hands in hers. "You have to trust me," she said.

I trusted her. The first person I had ever trusted.

She reached up to touch my face, her hands as chilled as if she stood in the snow. She moved closer to me and from somewhere just out of sight I thought I heard a muffled noise, like scuffling footsteps. "Don't look," she said. "Don't look at anything but me."

I looked in her eyes and saw that the blue was flecked with silver. Her lashes were wet. I had never been so close to another person.

The noise came closer, closer. Elena's arms reached around my neck, her body pressed so close to mine I could feel the beating of her heart. Closer still and I thought I heard a breath and a sound like the licking of lips.

For the briefest of moments Elena's head turned. There was a hiss. A noise like a wet thing hitting the wall and the scrabble of fingernails. Then silence.

She let go, pushed me away, and in the dim light her irises were flooded with waves of dark ink, her hair wet, her fingers, whether reaching for me or warding me off I did not know, long and thin and crabbed. A vein stood out on her forehead, a thread of blue beneath skin stretched tight over bone.

"Monsieur Orphan," she whispered.

And I stumbled away, stumbled down the rocking carriage, the hissing still in my ears and her hands still reaching like ghosts at my back. Stumbled all the way to the cattle-sheds where the three southerners sat hunched on their bunks.

But if I had hoped to have time to gather my scattered wits, I was sorely mistaken. The men darted towards me.

"There was something here," one whispered, "something –"

But I was not listening. I looked at their faces.

"What?" they said. "What is it?" – scrambling for the cracked mirror on the wall, pushing each other out of the way to be the first to see.

Each of them was missing the colour of their eyes.

It is recommended that you drink two glasses of vodka washed down with milk before bedtime, so that you may have a dreamless sleep.

The next morning it began to snow. Patterns appeared in ice on the window, like the lacquer tracing on the houses of the wealthy in Beijing. When I put my fingers to the glass, the patterns moved.

The southerners stayed huddled in their bunks as other rumours sped around the train. A woman who had lost the little finger on her left hand. Another whose hair had turned into brittle yellow grass. A man who swore he could no longer see the colour red.

"Are we close? Are we close?" whispered someone down the carriage, over and over again. "Are we there, are we close?"

"Nearly there," I whispered back. "Nearly there."

The last night came. I combed my hair in the mirror and I walked towards the lights of the dining car.

The tables were pushed against the walls and a man sat in the corner with a violin, playing a reel as couples danced, their bodies pressed close together, sweat beading on their foreheads. Through the crowd, I saw her, alone and watchful.

"May I have this dance?" I held out my hand.

She raised her eyes to mine, and I could not tell if she wished to frown or to smile.

"Remember what I said about foolish men?"

"I remember," I said.

She took my hand. "You said you trusted me." I nodded.

"Then you must do what I say. Tonight especially. You must do what I say."

"I will," I said, "I promise."

We stepped into the crowd.

"We will pass the dividing line soon," said Elena.

"And enter Europe." The word sounded strange on my lips.

"We will dance into a new continent," she said.

I felt her hair against my neck, her cool hand in mine. The music was unfamiliar, a celebration and a lament all at once.

Faster the violin played, and faster. Elena laughed as stray curls flew in front of her eyes. Couples spun around us, colours turning to dark gold beneath the lights, hair stuck to skin, lips parted, breathless.

I saw my cabin-mates, holding each other's arms, their white eyes stark against their flushed skin. I saw the woman with hair of yellow grass. And Elena, in my arms, her face lined with blue veins, her eyes cloudy, her hand in my hand long-nailed and pale. Water dripped from her hair. As I brushed her skin a few iridescent scales dropped onto her dress.

We danced into a new continent.

I wanted to lean forward and brush my lips against hers. I wanted to stay like this, as close as we were. To imagine we were alone in all the great unknown spaces of Siberia and that nothing could harm us because she would keep all the bad things away.

I felt the tears well up in my eyes, but I was not ashamed.

I looked down and saw that her hair had turned to silvery white. I could feel water trickling over my fingers, down her back, soaking her dress. The tears pooling in my eyes flooded down my cheeks. Heavier and heavier they flowed, over my lips and into my mouth. I struggled to draw a breath. I blinked and blinked but the water had blinded me and I felt something change, felt her stiffen in my arms, felt her try to pull away. She raised her eyes to mine and she spoke words that I could not hear, that I did not want to hear, that were *Let me go*. But I held her tight, though I was weakening, held her as she twisted and twisted in my arms, wet and slippery and icy cold, and her fingernails were in my skin, clawing at me, pushing me away, but I wasn't afraid, I wasn't afraid at all and for a moment she was still and I think I saw her begin to smile, but there was only darkness before my eyes, and the roaring of water.

Those who make the journey make it only once. You can see its traces, if you know how to look. You can see the iron that runs through them, forever.

They told me I was lucky. That I'd had a close escape.

"Stronger than you look!" they said, "To fight it off like that."

"To think it had been here all this time..." They shook their heads. "*Monster*," they said.

They admired me.

And though I searched the train, banged on every door of every cabin, made myself into a madman, it was all to no end. She had vanished.

We arrived in Moscow in a rainstorm, crossing the border wall into the frontier town. A week later I stood outside the Gare de Lyon in Paris with my suitcase and my box of paints and walked into the city I had travelled thousands of miles to reach.

And here I remain. Paris is filled with sunshine and music. There are roses in bloom in Montmartre. I paint. You may have seen me, I have a spot on Rue Azaïs, just below Sacré Cœur. I call out to the tourists to come, let me sketch you a portrait! Only a few francs. A memory to treasure, my friends, come, sit, once I studied at the Conservatoire des Arts, I am not just any street pedlar.

And they come, the pleasure-seekers of Paris, and I draw. I like the women the best, I like to draw their dark hair and full lips, the contours of their cheekbones. I have made something of a name for myself – they seek me out, those

who are in the bloom of their beauty and youth, because they know I can capture it forever.

And all the time, I look for the face I saw on a train, in the middle of a lost country, many years ago. All the time I hold on to that thin iron thread that links the two halves of my life together, that links me across all those miles, across continents, to what I was, and what I became.

They are here, somewhere. The ones who are like her, who hide behind human faces, who walk amongst us. I have spent my life seeking them out again. This is my price, the price we must all pay, we who ride the train across that terrible, wondrous expanse. Unique to every traveller, it is said, and although the price is high I cannot regret it. I am not afraid.

For I know they are here, and that one day amidst all the many faces I draw I will find one that is twisted and strange and beautiful.

And they will tell me what she was, and what she wanted, and where she has gone.

Sarah Brooks has lived in China, the far south of Italy, and the far north of Japan, but is now settled in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, and teaches part time in the Chinese department of the University of Leeds. She's a graduate of the 2012 Clarion West Writers' Workshop, and has stories published or forthcoming in *Shimmer* and the *Journal of Unlikely Entomology*.

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Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back...

John Shirley talks to Andy Hedgecock about optimism, lunatic excesses and Vipassana Buddhism



NEW TABOOS

John Shirley

PM Press (Outspoken Authors) pb, 128pp, \$12

New Taboos Plus... includes a novella, 'A State of Imprisonment'; an essay re-visioning America, 'New Taboos'; a transcript of Shirley's provocative TEDx address on the threats and promises of the real Singularity, 'Why We Need Forty Years of Hell'; and a wide ranging and insightful interview with Terry Bisson, 'Pro is for Professional'.

I was thoroughly gripped by 'A State of Imprisonment' – it works as a tense, provocative short story and as a jeremiad against the surrender of judgement and democratic responsibility as a result of creeping corporate control. It's a dark vision and yet there's an optimistic edge in the form of golden thread of humane engagement, bravery and decency. That optimism is apparent in your TED address and interview too. What experiences inform that optimism and what sustains it? You talk like a bitter, cynical man who can't imagine being optimistic about humanity... and I respect that! I was just looking at photos of men, women and children killed by nerve gas in Syria today. It's hard to be optimistic, seeing that. But it could be that *optimistic* is the wrong word. It's too easy to generalize about humanity – and there's much to give us hope. The persistence of people who work in organizations like Amnesty International, UNICEF, people with true commitment – that gives me hope. And some measure of optimism.

And as a society, we do *learn*. We learned that lead poisoning caused antisocial behaviour, all kinds of illnesses, so we eliminated lead from gasoline. We gave women and minorities the right to vote, at least in this country, and yours. We learned to be really, truly reluctant to use nuclear weapons. In the USA we got a blatant clue about pollution from a river actually catching fire. We learn. Three steps forward, two steps back. But that leaves a profit of one step.



What drew you to the conceit of a prison corporation colonising an entire state? Is there a sense in which privatised prisons stand for the worst aspects of the untrammelled free market?

As I understand it, the privatized prison industry is the most profitable, fastest growing business in Arizona – that suggests a state-wide prison is not such a fantastically improbable thing. But in my story the *extent* of the prison is satire really, it's a bit Swiftian. I don't expect it to go that far.

Yes, I think privatized prisons do a fine job of symbolizing what's wrong with a wholly unregulated free market. If we toss out too many regulations, most of which were there for good reasons, we don't get a better marketplace, we get a nightmarish condition of bullying dominance and parasitism by a few "shops" in the market. We get lunatic excesses; we end up overrun with people who go to extremes because they're in a sort of greed-induced drunkenness. It's like a gambling fever, it's a form of insanity. And in that state, as it were, they will dehumanize people. What better place to accomplish dehumanization than in a prison? We've seen a pattern in privatized prisons of people used, ever more, as unpaid labour for side industries all out of proportion with the old days of "making license plates" and such. We've seen that privatized prisons are motivated to keep people in; that municipalities are motivated to consign people to these prisons because they get financial benefits along the way, and that allows administrators to raise their own salaries.

Do you write to connect to people, to outwit reality (to quote Graham Swift), to dare the worst to happen in an act of benign voodoo (to quote Iain Sinclair)? If not for those reasons, why?



Performing with The Screaming Geezers

Writers usually write because of some inner compulsion. Vanity may also play a part. I do like the idea of "outwitting" reality. And I do think that some kind of benign influence is possible through storytelling. Some will say that trying to make a difference in the world through storytelling is not "pure art". I would ask those people "Who are you to enslave art to your own detachment from suffering? Who are you to define it to your convenience?"

In the late 1980s the critic DJ Taylor (in *A Vain Conceit*) despaired at the lack of social engagement and unwillingness to face up to big issues in literary fiction. And in 2003 John Pilger wondered: "But where are the contemporary works that go to the heart of this funny old world, as the books of Steinbeck and Joseph Heller did?" Your work is unashamedly politically engaged: what is it about genre fiction that lends it to the exploration of urgent themes such as destruction of the environment and our slow but inexorable slide into corporate fascism?

Not all my work is politically engaged. Some of it is just about the human condition. But my science fiction often has political and social subtext, which is certainly not unprecedented. I find myself thinking of Spinrad's *The Men in the Jungle*, or certain works by Phil Dick and Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree) and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*.

If there's been little political statement in fiction lately it's perhaps because there's been a warped, snotty perception that it's "uncool", here in the USA anyhow. People assume it must be self-indulgent, heavy handed. They will sneer at it – a rather knee-jerk response. This snotty perception is only reinforced by the fact that in the heavy hands of some writers and would-be writers...political fiction can be heavy handed! I have had young writers say they are trying to be "the voice of the 1%". And when I sample the material, I find it couched in a hectoring "infodump", a lot of sodden writing that isn't going to fly with most readers. But find a way to let the story itself make the statement, as Steinbeck and Heller and Dickens did...and the reader will at least go along for the ride. They'll consider your thesis more readily.

Genre fiction, science fiction and horror *do* seem ready made for political statement and social critique. Orwell, LeGuin, Margaret Atwood...Michael Moorcock at times...Delany, Brunner – they all seemed attracted to science fiction's power to use powerfully dramatized social symbols. When you can imagine, for example, intelligent robots working for a privileged few to keep the many enslaved (as in *Elysium*), you have the components of a parable glaring at you like over-lit stage lights.

It can be rather too stark a parable and can lead us to a loss of complexity. You don't want *too much* complexity but you also

don't want to be simple minded. In the case of 'A State of Imprisonment' in *New Taboos*, the setting is simplified perhaps a little too much. But I tried to bring a social texture to the story to give some verisimilitude alongside the science-fiction touches.

I won't be forgiven by my son Max if I don't ask you this: what appealed to you about the opportunity to tackle the *Bioshock: Rapture* novel?

Some of my work is done to make a living – *Bioshock: Rapture* for example. But the *Bioshock* video game did dramatize the inherent shortcomings of Ayn Rand's thinking. And, since extreme states of mind arise from the abuse of the super power plasmids "freely marketed" in the story, ah well, that fits in with my own predilection for depicting madness vividly; I'm afraid I do it with an almost perverse pleasure. So I was able to make it fun as well as meaningful, I hope. *Bioshock: Rapture* has done quite well.

You've produced eight short story collections, crammed with powerful and unsettling ideas, and symbols, that test the limitations of the form. What maintains your faith in the short story as an effective way of communicating ideas?

Idea and the short story form go together – one idea, with ramifications, for each short story. There is a punchy quality to the short story, a right-hook-to-the-jaw directness a writer of short stories relishes. There's also the polished-jewel quality they can have. As for testing the limits, why not? That was almost all I wanted to do, originally. It was in my nature. Testing limits was part of the culture I came out of: the underground, the rock avant-garde, my liking for Dada and the surrealists and poets like Baudelaire...



Speaking at TEDx Brussels, 2011

What drew you to SF and horror as a reader and writer?

SF and horror are colourful, vivid, intense, and what young man isn't drawn to that? At the same time I would read people like Ballard, who evoked bizarre imagery but also wrote finely; people like Phil Dick stimulated my social imagination, made me question reality – always useful to do, without rejecting some reasonable model of reality. I was reading writers who were at once over the top and refined, like Clark Ashton Smith and, at his best, Harlan Ellison. I read Poe, and saw mastery and yet was inwardly thrilled. Some of the attraction may have something to do with an adolescent state of mind, but I don't think we should smother the adolescent within us under a pillow. He has his place; at times he's like the electronic part that boosts transmission. Plus, I think SF and horror both offer a writer routes past the reader's defences. I don't mean to sound aggressive with readers – but they do have defences. The writer engages in something more like seduction, perhaps, with someone who really wants to be seduced

but who, quite wisely, is dubious about seducers. We "seducers" look for a way to real intimacy with the reader. The high energy level in SF and horror, the psychological power of it, opens doors into the reader's mind. That's appealing to a writer.

Then again, there's the access to *ideas themselves*. SF, fantasy and horror are ideal for those of us who are simply idea-oriented. And the ideas can take many forms. I can explore spiritual ideas as well as social ones or futuristic ones. I do so in *The Other End*; I do it in *Doyle After Death* [published by HarperCollins/Witness in October 2013]. *Doyle After Death* imagines Arthur Conan Doyle solving crimes in an after-life world: what would that world be like, if there was one? What crimes could be committed there? The dark fantasy/detective crossover offered me a chance to create a sort of conceptual playground. Very enjoyable.

What can you tell us about the joys and horrors of collaborative writing – in story and song?

Collaborating with musicians is to some extent different to collaborating with another writer. Musical collaboration feels more like a gestalt, more communal, at least to me. Authors by contrast are used to "flying solo". Compromise is much called for. It's more intellectual than based in artistic feel; music, for me, is mostly an emotional, artistic feel. I have tried to bring some of that feeling, that intuitive energy, to my writing, and to collaborations, but it flows more naturally in music.

In 'Pro is for Professional' you highlighted G.I. Gurdjieff's notion that we need to be shaken into a more conscious and mindful state of being. 'A State of Imprisonment' heightened my sense that we collude in our own

psychological imprisonment, living in a manufactured reality defined through the control of information. Is the notion of collusion hatched from my reading or is it embedded in your intention for the narrative? To borrow an expression from the late Iain Banks, has the story wandered off and come home with a punk hairdo?

Some readers will reinterpret symbols to their own convenience. My novel *Everything is Broken* is an entertainment, slightly futuristic noir but also a fairly out-front political statement dramatizing the damage done by “Tea Party” anti-government extremism. But someone sent me a note weirdly claiming it was a “pro-gun” screed! In the end it’s the writer’s responsibility to make sure the symbols are coming across, that they’re actually communicating and not muddying the painting.

As to symbolism in ‘State of Imprisonment’, yes, it’s there, and I do try to make readers wonder if they’re collaborating with someone else’s false reality construct. And with the new CGI, we will eventually have to be sceptical about media reality. Imagine a news channel showing tanks rolling across the border from Mexico, say. Suppose it’s totally fabricated, there are no tanks at all, but you *can’t tell* this from watching what seems to be real footage. And of course, in the real world, the recent war in Iraq was supported in the media by false evidence of WMDs. But it’s just too easy to say that media is “controlled”. Media is more complex than that and, if anything, it’s harder to control than ever. So the process is more likely to be subtle. It’s likely to use our knee-jerk reactions, or automatic responses to symbols. Or, as in ‘State of Imprisonment’, our moral lassitude. Just not caring about an issue allows other

people to control the perception of that issue.

We should be as sceptical of conspiracy theories as we’re sceptical of a government’s military agenda. Otherwise, we can be exploited by quite a different set of people.

But if we’re sufficiently politically conscious, and sufficiently in touch with objective conscience, we can get to some kind of consensus about what is real. Overpopulation is still a real problem; climate change is real; the egregious corruption in places like India is real; the USA’s movement toward submission to the control of major corporations is real.

What else can we take from Gurdjieff? Does he have more to say to contemporary readers looking for alternative approaches to making sense of their world?

Gurdjieff was not without “warts”; he was not a saint; he was not right about everything. I’m just as influenced, philosophically, by Spinoza, Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, Lao Tzu, as by Gurdjieff. But it happens he had several key insights I hold dear. One is his insistence that we’re usually asleep when we think we’re awake. One is the insight that we’re mechanical in our responses when we think we’re free. And then there’s the idea that certain meditational methods for consciousness expansion free us up for empathy. You can find parallels in Vipassana Buddhism or Zen. These procedures need not have any mystical component whatever. They can be purely neurological and psychological, if you like. Vipassana practitioners, Gurdjieff’s methods, Zen...are their techniques freeing? I think they are; I think they do offer that possibility, if one does the inner work. It takes time to find a way out of prison. As in ‘A State of Imprisonment’, if you keep seeking...there is a way out.



EXIT KINGDOM

Alden Bell

Tor hb, 287pp, £16.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

Late in *Exit Kingdom* Father Ignatius tells Moses Todd that no one is ever lost in America: “It’s all destination. Every corner of it. [...] Do you see it?” And Moses does – “the whole country, just one big road, attached to itself in different ways”. For Moses, “a true frontiersman”, “defined by forwardness”, his whole life has been a journey, especially since the frontier abruptly reopened when the dead began to rise. In Bell’s previous novel, *The Angels are the Reapers*, Todd was the adversary, hunting Temple, the girl who killed his brother, Abraham. Although *Exit Kingdom* is nominally set after this time, the story Moses tells at a stranger’s campfire takes place well before Abraham’s death, making it both sequel and prequel.

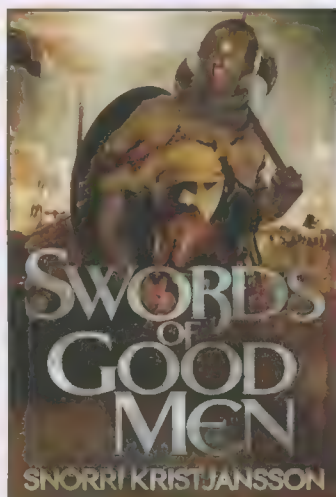
The story is filled with motifs familiar from the previous novel, not least the allegorical landscape which mysteriously continues to provide for its inhabitants as necessary, even though many years have passed since society collapsed. Bell attempts a cursory explanation of why the infrastructure survives in

various places but this is clearly not where his interest lies. The dead continue to wait patiently for the living, while the living for the most part prey on one another's weaknesses, or else hide from outlaws and form contingent communities.

At one such, Moses and Abraham meet Father Ignatius, who asks them to deliver a young woman, whom he calls the Vestal Amata, to a facility where they can investigate the fact that she appears to repel the dead. Ignatius previously rescued the woman from a carnival. Moses, Abraham and Amata head north into an increasingly snowbound landscape, pursued by the carny folk, encountering the usual set of figures and tropes that inhabit contemporary zombie novels.

Exit Kingdom poses the question of how, psychologically, one might survive an apocalypse. Moses is the product of a society permeated by a simple but strong religious faith. It is reflected in his speech, in his storytelling, in his expectations of others' behaviour. He has a code of honour, and tries to maintain a sense of order in his life, although he has lost everything he held dear. His journeys may seem aimless but he is nonetheless in the grip of a powerful if obscure destiny. He is the gunslinger who arrives in a community when most needed and moves on when the job is done: not a good man necessarily but a man who tries to do the right thing, all the while uncertain what that might mean in a world so radically changed.

In this, *Exit Kingdom* is more successful than its predecessor, perhaps because Moses has more experience than Temple, more to consider, more to regret. This is a much more intimate novel: the landscape Moses explores is internal rather than external and the post-apocalyptic setting is merely a beginning rather than the novel's apparent *raison d'être*.



SWORDS OF GOOD MEN

Snorri Kristjansson

Jo Fletcher Books pb, 352pp, £14.99

Ian Sales

Jo Fletcher Books is a genre imprint, and so the debut novel of UK-based Icelandic author Snorri Kristjansson has been packaged to suit. The cover art depicts a warrior in mail and furs carrying a battle-axe, gazing out broodingly from beneath a Spangenhelm. The subtitle reads "Valhalla Saga, Book I". But this is no opener for a fantasy saga. *Swords of Good Men* is historical fiction, set in Scandinavia just before the turn of the second millennium.

After two years of exile, Ulfar is returning home with noble cousin Geiri. They reach the town of Stenvik, which has a reputation for successful raiding. Things don't go quite as well as expected – Geiri's diplomatic introduction is rebuffed, and later when a fight breaks out in the longhouse, Geiri hits his head and falls into a coma. Just to make matters worse, Ulfar has fallen in love with Lilia, the abused wife of resident violent nutter, Harald. And then there's the healer, Valgard, who plans to use Harald to overthrow the king of Stenvik, Sigurd, and as his advi-

sor become the power behind the throne.

Meanwhile, marching toward Stenvik is King Olav, who is using his vast army to forcibly convert the Vikings to the religion of the White Christ. And there's Skuld, the young woman who claims to have been visited by the old gods and seems to have some of their powers, and she has now gathered a huge fleet of longships, also heading for Stenvik...

The first half of *Swords of Good Men* introduces the main cast and sets up the situation. The rest of the book is a blow-by-blow account of the battle for Stenvik. The novel is written in short sections of between half a page and two pages long, skipping between the many point of view characters. Much of the prose is dialogue, and what little descriptive prose that does exist tends to rely on well-worn phrases and repetition. Kristjansson's decision to use modern phraseology for the dialogue, however, does jar badly – you do not, for example, expect a Viking to say "No problem".

Given the short internal chronology of *Swords of Good Men*, the fact that half of the book is spent describing a single battle, the dialogue-heavy prose and modern vernacular, the short sections and multiple points of view, the book was plainly designed to be a fast read. There's nothing wrong with that per se, but there's a trade-off between story and pace, and perhaps *Swords of Good Men* errs a little too much toward the latter. At 352 pages, this is not the bloated tome typical of epic fantasy, though perhaps a little more breadth of story would not have gone amiss. *Swords of Good Men* will undoubtedly find fans, and they'll eagerly await the second instalment... But despite all those beefy Vikings swinging battle-axes the story could have done with a little more meat on its bones.



21st CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION

edited by David G. Hartwell & Patrick Nielsen Hayden

Tor hb, 576pp, \$34.99

Jo L. Walton

21st Century Science Fiction assembles thirty-four stories from the last thirteen-odd years. More precisely, it assembles thirty-four authors from those years, insofar as “nobody in this book came to wide notice before 2000”. One drawback of that selection criterion is that the editors are a bit less free to include authors who should have come to wide notice. The anthology conveys that faint, inexpugnable belligerence of a definitive textbook, positioned somewhere between *here’s the state of the art, by its acknowledged masters* and *here’s the next big thing*.

Stories do range from quite good to extremely good. They’re nicely sequenced too. I’m less wild about the editorial metatext. We get a terse preface, then each story gets its own little fanfare. These intros are smart, but they’re fairly spoilerish.

The preface points to “a world in which SF [...] is a firmly established part of the cultural landscape”. That makes sense, but fan-

tasy fiction is the mithril-barded three-trunked oliphant in the room, and it subtly colours and shapes the anthology throughout. Liz Williams’ ‘Ikiryoh’ is delicately poised on the threshold between fantasy and SF. “It would have been called black magic, once. Now it is black science.” Paul Cornell’s faintly Moorcock-esque ‘One of our Bastards is Missing’ is probably my pick of the swash-buckling yarns, though perhaps it has more in common with historical fiction than fantasy per se.

Three stories (Rachel Swirsky, Genevieve Valentine, Madeline Ashby) deal in different but complementary ways with sex and love between humans and robots. These stories share an interplay between (a) the robot as metaphor for some real kind of oppression, and (b) the robot who implies a new axis of identity altogether, one which intersects with race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age and others. I take two things from this. First, a fierce reluctance to blur the lines between different forms of oppression; our zeitgeist even takes care not to appropriate the experience of fictional robots. Second, prophetic expectation of a new figure of oppression may suggest unease with existing struggles, unease with the existing ensemble of politically-organised dimensions of identity.

John Scalzi’s breezy Golden Age reboot sits nearby thematically – Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics, only hold the robots. James Cambias and Elizabeth Bear also prod compellingly at machine morality and machine mysticism. Ken Liu and Daryl Gregory could fit into this cluster, with stories drawing on neuroscience-savvy Anglo-American philosophy of mind. It’s an interesting relationship, since philosophers working in this area have already drawn liberally on speculative fiction imagery (Chalmers’ zombies;

Searle’s Chinese Room; Jackson’s Mary’s room; also swampmen, blockheads, twin earthlings, weather watchers, brains in vats, brain tissue gradually replaced with circuitry, etc). Liu’s story blurs distinctions between ‘determined’ and ‘predictable’, whilst Gregory’s seems to fudge two different kinds of ‘self’ – roughly, stream-of-consciousness self vs psychological and interpersonal self. However, both stories are affecting and intellectually provocative, and their elisions do serve narrative purposes.

Overall the anthology offers a good diversity of subject, style, mood, accessibility and length but, with the exceptions of Karl Schroeder’s ‘To Hie from Far Cilenia’ (a techno-thriller threaded through a tapestry of augmented reality, MMORPGs-within-MMORPGS, digital post-nations and steampunk cosplay), Paolo Bacigalupi’s ‘The Gambler’ (about clickbait journalism), and perhaps Cory Doctorow’s ‘Chicken Little’ (about various things, including nudge economics), it also contains little sustained exploration of the hereafter of the buzz; as far as I can remember, nobody hacks cryptocurrency, snaps a selfie or 3D-prints a harpoon.

I’ll just sign off with personal favourites: the robot triptych, especially Ashby’s ‘The Education of Junior Number 12’; the two opulent and tyrannically witty anthologies-within-the-anthology, Catherynne M. Valentine’s ‘How to Become a Mars Overlord’ and Yoon Ha Lee’s ‘A Vector Alphabet of Interstellar Travel’; David Levine’s ‘Tk’tk’tk’, a charismatic story of the Other, which has led me to believe that David Levine has been somewhere on holiday; Tony Ballantyne’s ‘The Waters of Meribah’, which out-Dicks Dick; and two incisive, physics-respecting space operettas, Peter Watts’ ‘The Island’ and James Cambias’ ‘Balancing Accounts’.



WE SEE A DIFFERENT FRONTIER

edited by Fabio Fernandes & Djibril al-Ayad

Futurefire pb, 213pp, £9.00

Jack Deighton

By and large the language of science fiction has always been English, its explorations of other worlds in the main tending to describe their exploitation. This anthology illustrates how language, or its suppression, has been a primary tool of colonialism on Earth. There is irony, then, that, as Ekaterina Sedia's afterword notes, all these stories were written in US English. Yet the theme of resistance, the keeping of traditions, shines through.

'The Arrangement of Their Parts' by Shweta Narayan is a partly fabulous tale of clockwork animals taken to pieces by an Englishman and the Artificer Diva who stands up to him. The delightfully titled but pulpy 'Pancho Villa's Flying Circus' by Ernest Hogan tells how with the help of Nikola Tesla's death ray Alejandro Sahagún replaces Pancho Villa and sets out to recover his sweetheart, abducted by Hollywood producers. While a slight tale this rightly fingers Hollywood as the

centre of cultural colonialism.

In 'Them Ships' by Silvia Moreno-Garcia aliens have taken over Earth. Our narrator, a former street scavenger, wonders why his cell-mate would want to escape what he regards as a cosseted life. In J.Y. Yang's 'Old Domes' Jing-Li is a cullmaster, charged with despatching guardians – the personifications of buildings – before their renovation. The guardian of Singapore's Supreme Court is unwilling to go quietly.

Fabio Fernandes' 'The Gambiarra Method' reads a bit like a 1950s magazine story. Time travel is discovered in 2077. By accident. In anti-gravitational lifts with an attached post-virtual environment. The mechanism is investigated using the Gambiarra method – how to do things with whatever is at hand. Riya in 'A Bridge of Words' by Dinesh Rao has spent most of her life in Krashnigar, the former colonial power. She is now involved in a project to decipher the tattoos of the *Thuri*, one of the two sects of her ancestral homeland. Over this world hangs a mysterious spaceship broadcasting an unchanging coded message.

In Rahul Kanakia's 'Droplet' Subhir has lived in India after his parents took him there from his childhood home in California to avoid the ever worsening drought conditions. On his return to the US he finds out what really happened. In Joyce Chng's 'Lotus' most of the Earth is covered in water after an event called the Washing. Landers fight fiercely to hold on to their territories while boaters roam the Waterways, exchanging and bartering. Boater Cecily and her partner one day come upon a source of precious drinkable water and food, giving them a moral dilemma.

Lavie Tidhar's 'Dark Continents' envisages several different ways in which the past two centuries of Jewish history could have worked

themselves out. These include forging a disputed homeland in Africa, intervention in the US Civil War and a peaceful integration into Palestine. 'A Heap of Broken Things' by Sunny Moraine features a planet lit by two suns, where human colonists carried out a massacre a generation before. A local tour guide is confronted with that inheritance.

Sandra McDonald's 'Fleet' is set a generation after the Night of Fire when solar flares destroyed all electronic communication. The people of a Pacific island forge their future in isolation. In 'Remembering Turinam' by N.A. Ratnyake a scholar from a defeated people whose language and culture have been oppressed, all but forgotten, returns to his capital city to speak with his grandfather, the last remaining witness to the old days. Sofia Samatar's 'I Stole the DC's Eyeglass' is the story of Pai-te and her sister Minisare who has a spirit-eye and builds an iron beast as a gesture of "defiance honour, dawn, tomorrow".

'Vector' by Benjanun Sriduangkaew is set in a US-dominated Thailand where no-one has dark hair any more, nor speaks Thai. A woman's body has been turned into a viral weapon to undo the changes. In Gabriel Murray's 'Forests of the Night' the illegitimate son of the ex-colonial Captain Lyons, brought to Yorkshire to act as his father's valet, dreams of the tiger that is stalking the local neighbourhood. In 'What Really Happened in Ficandula' by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz a cultural misunderstanding leads to deaths and reprisals, the memories of which are kept alive by the female descendants of the colonised as they themselves head for a new planet.

As with most anthologies the standard can be uneven, but each story works as speculative fiction, and four are very good indeed.



EVENING'S EMPIRES

Paul McAuley

Gollancz hb, 384pp, £14.99

Paul Kincaid

There has been a strange progression in Paul McAuley's Quiet War sequence. *The Quiet War* and its immediate sequel, *Gardens of the Sun*, were set roughly five hundred years in our future. The next volume, *In the Mouth of the Whale*, took a great leap forward in time, and there has been another great leap in this fourth book, which takes place around fifteen hundred years after the whole sequence started. But as the sequence has moved forward in time, so its focus has narrowed. The first book had a wide cast of viewpoint characters, this number was reduced in the next book, and *In the Mouth of the Whale* moved between just three viewpoints. Now, in *Evening's Empires*, we follow the story of one character, Gajananvihari Pilot, known as Hari.

When we first meet him, Hari has been cast upon a deserted rock, like some far future Robinson Crusoe. His family's ship has been taken over by pirates, and he has escaped, along with the head of Dr Gagarian. Then we get our first clue that

there was more than just piracy involved: cloned sisters of the group who took over his ship arrive to attack him. Hari manages to turn the tables, leaving both assassins dead and making his getaway, but straight away he finds himself in peril again. So the novel progresses, in a breathless, nonstop sequence of flight and attack, capture and escape. Between the thrills, and McAuley writes the action scenes very well indeed, Hari begins to work his way through the layers of betrayal that lies behind the initial attack, and at the same time discovers the true worth of the files in Dr Gagarian's head. Along the way he acquires a couple of unlikely allies, the untrustworthy adventurer Rav, and the independent-minded daughter of one of Dr Gagarian's former colleagues, Riyya; but he acquires far more enemies, including a religious sect known as the Saints, the cloned offspring of Sri Hong-Owen (a direct link with the other three volumes), and most disturbing of all, members of his own family.

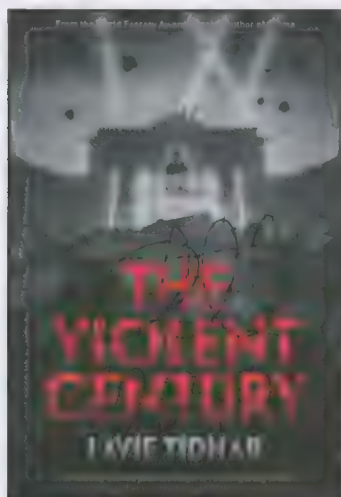
Evening's Empires works as a gripping action adventure, but it is more than that. Hari's various escapades take him to a variety of settlements scattered across this far future solar system, and what we see is as convincing a portrait of everyday life in space as anything McAuley has written, with the possible exception of *The Quiet War* itself. But there is one significant difference: where that first volume presented a system of enterprise and optimism even in the face of war itself, what we see here is bankrupt, in social and economic decline. We see garden environments that have been abandoned, systems that are running down, economic structures that are close to slavery. The posthumans are turning their backs upon humankind, and what remains has neither the energy

nor the will to sustain the diverse range of human habitation that had been built up.

One of the ways this comes across is in a turning to the past. The novel is filled with people telling stories about what happened; some are presented as the unvarnished truth, though mostly we recognise that they are partial or incomplete truths at best. This dependence on story is one of the major themes of the novel, reflected in a host of ways from the fact that Hari's most treasured possession is a book, to the titles McAuley gives his sections: 'Childhood's End', 'Marooned Off Vesta', 'The Caves of Steel', 'The Cold Equations', etc. This isn't meant to tell us that this is a recapitulation of old hard SF works, but rather to suggest how much the stories we have been told shape the things we see.

The biggest story of all concerns the Bright Moment, when everyone alive across the solar system had the same brief vision at exactly the same instant. This happened before Hari was even born, but it is still the greatest thing in human experience, a mystery, a hope, the creator of cults and instigator of wars. It is what Dr Gagarian was investigating, but the truth about the experience matters less than the legend. The way that so much is invested in the Bright Moment seems to reflect all we need to know about how the expansion of *The Quiet War* has been replaced by the decline of *Evening's Empires*. Hari's quest inevitably entangles with this great mystery, but the solution may not be what anybody considered.

The Quiet War was one of the best books McAuley has written, and *Evening's Empires* makes an excellent companion to it. These are books that, if there is any justice, will shape the stories we tell about our solar system for many years to come.



THE VIOLENT CENTURY

Lavie Tidhar

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 342pp, £18.99

Stephen Theaker

It's a shame Patrick Stewart played Karla rather than Smiley in the BBC adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, because it deprives us of the perfect one-man illustration of *The Violent Century*: what if George Smiley and Professor Charles Xavier were one and the same man? In the Old Man's world, Stanley Lieber (who adds another excellent cameo to his already impressive list), Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster are renowned experts on the superheroes, rather than their creators.

The divergence from our history takes place in 1932, when the German scientist Doktor Vomacht triggers the event that creates a breed of super-powered, ever-youthful humans. Our main interest is in Henry Fogg, who in keeping with the nominative determinism sometimes seen in such matters develops the ability to control fog, mist and smoke. There's no better power for a spy than to have somewhere to hide wherever he goes, and so Fogg is in 1936 recruited by the Old Man, and taken not to Xavier's School

for the Gifted, but The Farm, a training camp in Devon for super-powered soldiers and spies. There he develops a bond with Oblivion, a handsome fellow whose power is to make things disappear. Within five years they're watching battles between the Union of Socialist Heroes and the rocket men of the Reich over Leningrad, and as the century passes it will take them to other wars, to Laos, Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The title might suggest comparisons with a comic like *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Century*, which showed heroes living the length of the twentieth century, but in tone this is more reminiscent of Ed Brubaker's superb run on *Captain America*, which similarly examined the intersection of war, spies and superheroes.

Comics aside, it covers similar ground to *Declare* by Tim Powers, albeit at a much quicker pace, and substituting Marvel and DC for that book's Arabian Nights. Both novels tell their stories mostly in flashback, reflections prompted by the handler who makes contact again after a long period of silence. The main difference between the two is perhaps the one slightly disappointing aspect of this book: *Declare* eventually moved past the flashbacks, while the present day events here prove to be little more than an epilogue.

One frequent problem with superhero fiction in prose is that it simply can't keep up with the comics; it could take paragraphs, even pages, to fully describe the contents of even a single panel. Tidhar cleverly uses French dashes for dialogue, short sentences, short chapters (one hundred and sixty-four of them) and the present tense to close that gap: "Oblivion kicks his door open. Slides out. Fogg follows. Crouching. Looking up, shadow on the rooftop". He also has a particular way with a subtly devastating sentence. When

Fogg is sent to eastern Europe and ends up joining local partisans on a suicide mission, he thinks: "Anything to justify this sojourn to the outer realms of the war, where nothing much happens but for the mass transportation of the Jews".

The book's engagement with historical events is serious-minded, past tragedies never reduced to a colourful backdrop to adventure or a playground for overgrown children. In the Marvel universe, Hitler survived, his consciousness transferred to a clone, and he became a super-villain: the Hate-Monger! There's nothing daft like that here. Yes, Werhner Von Braun does build himself that squad of useless rocket-men, but his brief presence serves to connect the post-war rush to acquire superheroes to the similar scramble for rocket scientists that took place here on Earth-Prime.

When the Jewish hero Sabra leaps into the air to battle blond Schneesturm over the Warsaw Ghetto, it isn't just cool – though it is that too, very cool – it's desperate and moving. When Fogg's fellow super-agent Tank is captured and taken to Auschwitz, the book knows we can bear to read about the pain of a tortured superhero, and uses that as a lever to force us into thinking about the real atrocities of that place. Some of that might make the book rather gruelling, but there's plenty of dry humour, and lots of action, such as fog giants battling ice giants in Paris, or "Dracul" versus the Wolfskommando in Transylvania. There's even romance, as Fogg falls for the mysterious Sommertag and what she represents: she's the one person who can step out of the war whenever she likes.

Coming hard on the heels of the equally good but stylistically very different *Martian Sands*, *The Violent Century* is an excellent novel that demonstrates, once again, the impressive versatility of its author.



PHOENIX

SF Said

David Fickling Books hb, 496pp, £12.99

Barbara Melville

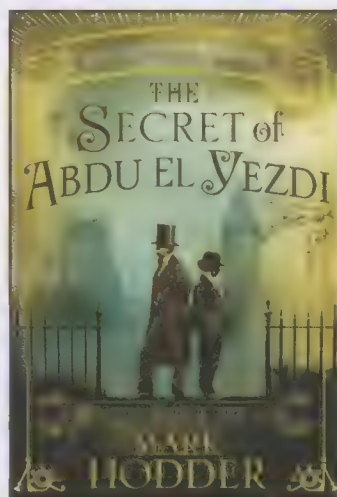
As a child, in my desperate attempt to grow up fast, I read a great deal of adult science fiction. I never experienced the innocence and playfulness of stories for children, which is something I've always regretted. So now I'm in my adulthood, several hundred years later, I like to pick up a book for young people, escape into their shoes, and try to reclaim what I missed. I often find I'm too much of a stick in the mud, whimpering that the stories are patronising or shallow. So *Phoenix*, the third of Said's books for children, surprised me on many levels. Not only does it break new territory – epic space adventures are, after all, not in abundance on the children's shelf – but it is layered with depth and meaning right from the get go.

It begins on the planet Phoenix. Our timid main character Lucky is a seemingly ordinary boy, until one day he wakes up covered with ash. There's no time to explain as his mother guides him to escape the imminent dangers of inter-planetary war. Lucky finds sanctuary on the *Sunfire*: a dark, dank

spaceship home to a family of Axxa, a star-worshipping, fire-eyed alien race. Lucky has a bargaining chip: a mysterious device that can fly their craft. But sadly the Axxa don't have all the answers, and things are getting worse: something is eating the stars. The story follows Lucky's quest across space to find out who or what he is, where he came from, and what he can do to save the galaxy.

Lucky discovers he has unusual abilities, which tie in to my favourite part in the story: the physics of Said's universe. All matter is mysteriously connected through time and space, holding memories of its previous atomic states. With the help of an astrolabe – a cosmic compass of sorts – Lucky's consciousness can navigate these connections, allowing him to plot optimal courses for the *Sunfire*. Then there are the stars, an intelligence who communicate through song, but only 'startalkers' can hear and speak with them. These and many other elements are enriched through Dave McKean's haunting, beautiful illustrations; an essential dimension illuminating the story's more complex concepts.

At its heart, *Phoenix* is about identity, tolerance and relationships. These themes are explored throughout the quest, but one notable example is Lucky's changeable feelings toward Bixa, a feisty young Axxa warrior with neon needles in her hair. Initially he is repelled by her presence, convinced by scaremongering rumours of the Axxa's hostility. But he comes around, learning humans and Axxa have much in common. These multilayered themes and ideas, reinforced by strong characterisation, make this book shine. It could have worked without them, making for a fun but depthless guilty pleasure. I'm glad Said picked the path he did. The result is a touching, meaningful story for children and adults alike.



THE SECRET OF ABDU EL YEZDI

Mark Hodder

Del Rey hb, 416pp, £16.99

Peter Loftus

It is 1859, almost twenty years after the assassination of Queen Victoria. The British Empire is enjoying a period of peace and prosperity facilitated by recent leaps in science and technology. A select few work behind the scenes to ensure the smooth running of the Empire and furtherance of its interests, a cabal that includes King George V, Prince Albert, Benjamin Disraeli, and Isambard Brunel. For years now they have been guided by a mysterious visitor from the Afterlife: the spirit of dead mystic Abdu El Yezdi.

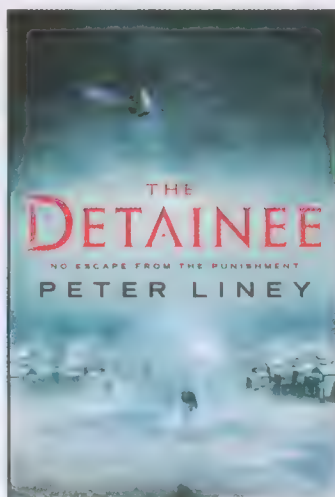
But dark forces are at work. The leading lights of science, medicine and engineering (such as Florence Nightingale and Charles Babbage) begin disappearing in a spate of abductions. Abdu El Yezdi refuses to speak with the living and in the wake of a grisly sacrifice, a sinister figure known as The Beast stands in the wings. The government, on the verge of signing a momentous accord with the newly formed Greater German Confederation, and understandably anxious

about the recent turn of events, summons intrepid explorer Sir Richard Burton, fresh from discovering the source of the Nile.

The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi is the fourth book in Mark Hodder's Burton & Swinburne series. Initiates of Hodder will know what to expect: an alternative history mash-up of steampunk, time travel and derring-do set in Victorian Britain. However, the world-building that made the first three books so appealing is slightly muted this time around. Yes, the reader is treated to more highly original technical marvels, but they don't take centre stage.

The charismatic Burton makes a fitting protagonist, a noble savage endowed with a keen intellect, statuesque bearing and quick fists. Hodder provides enough nuance through back-story and character quirks that our interest in and understanding of this iconic individual is furthered. Swinburne is excellent too, although more than a few other historical characters are name dropped rather than fully realised.

The story is pretty simple at the outset, but as so often happens when time travel is involved, soon becomes a convoluted quagmire that could very easily grate. Unfortunately, with plots like this, authors tend to begin by filling whiteboards with alternate timelines that look like the wiring diagram of the Death Star, which for the reader can mean interminable scenes of characters infodumping. While Hodder hasn't avoided this trap completely, his neatest trick – the Great Amnesia that followed Victoria's assassination – allows the characters to operate without knowledge of the manifold events and reversals that precede this latest instalment. The somewhat unwieldy exposition notwithstanding, this novel is a cracking romp set in a milieu to which I will happily return time and again.



THE DETAINEE

Peter Liney

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 298pp, £14.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

Visions of dystopian futures have always been a popular subspecies of genre literature, perhaps for reasons similar to why soap operas are popular: "My life may be bad, but it's not as bad as *theirs*". Additionally, there's always the satisfying spectacle of the underdog beating the system; that the spark of hope is still strong enough to inspire and motivate. Dystopian fiction appears to be particularly apposite these days, given current political climates. Perhaps here is yet another layer to ponder: the future is brittle, and human control over it is slippery. But does it necessarily have to be so?

Protagonist Clancy, also known as Big Guy, is an older man of somewhat indeterminate age who lives on an island which is essentially one large garbage dump. The place's population consists of the unwanted, the victims of a terminally-broken society, divided from the mainland where those who 'have' live in luxurious isolation from the 'have-nots'. The islanders are kept there, not through being guarded or fenced in, but

by satellites, meting out godlike punishment to any offenders from on high. Clancy (along with the rest of the human detritus on the island) spends his life scavenging amongst the piles of other people's refuse, recycling it for his own use. It's a miserable existence, made even worse when the fog creeps over the land at night, masking hideous terrors of its own – gangs who use the heavy fog to go on savage slaughtering raids. But, along the way he finds a ray of sunshine in the form of a blind girl called Lena, who lives in the tunnels underneath – she it is who gives him hope and, by extension, to the rest of the island.

It does share an ideological setting to E.J. Swift's novel *Osiris* in that there's a deliberate and divisive separation between rich and poor, physically and socially. The difference is that this is a much grimmer book, getting to the heart of human nature in its rawest state. The sights, sounds and smells of Clancy's surroundings, and the mass of humanity within it, invade the senses, with Liney's terse but descriptive prose forming a pin-sharp picture of the degradation this subset of humanity has been forced to endure. However, with Lena as the catalyst, we gradually see the Big Guy undergo a metamorphosis: from a man who is very much shaped by his environment to one who does the shaping. This is about how, by changing and rearranging one's surroundings, one can effect changes: by standing up and shouting, hearts and minds can be opened to possibilities. Despite everything, humans are able to adapt to their circumstances – plus, with a little ingenuity, a dire situation can be made much more bearable.

With this debut novel Liney is clearly setting out his genre credentials. It will be interesting to see what he will conjure up next.



SOME REMARKS

Neal Stephenson

Atlantic Books pb, 326pp, £9.99

Paul F. Cockburn

Seattle-based author Neal Stephenson has a reputation for generally writing *lots*. Not in the Barbara Cartland sense of quantity; we're talking size here. Stephenson's novels are long, not least because of their narrative scope and his attention to detail. So this volume, which he introduces as a "compilation of what are drolly referred to as my 'shorter works'" (though one essay, 'Mother Earth, Mother Board', runs for 118 pages) is somewhat unusual.

Whether this really is just the "shameless white-washing of [his own] historical record, picking only the good stuff, and editing even that to make it look better", or simply a means for his publisher to get another Neal Stephenson book out pretty damn quick, is debatable. If the former, then the author is the first to point out that most of what is included won't be that difficult to track down online in its original form. If the latter, then it at least has the potential to be an introduction for new readers.

At one point Stephenson writes

that Speculative Fiction (which would appear to be his preferred definition of SF) "thrives because it is ideas porn". If that's the case, then tissues should be at the ready as this collection of essays, lectures, journalism and even some short fiction zigzags wildly through a wide range of subjects and ideas: the health dangers arising from us sitting around so much nowadays ('Arsebestos' – an interesting choice to open a book that most people, presumably, will be reading while sitting down); why secularists failed to understand the potential consequences when dealing with the kind of religious beliefs found among members of the Branch Davidian community in Waco; and why literary critics don't tend to rate SF, even though science fiction has effectively become mainstream.

For the most part Stephenson makes his arguments well enough, and he can provide insights that stick with you – such as his assertion that crime dramas have been drawn to the episodic nature of most TV dramas while romance has become a significant movie genre for precisely the opposite reason. On occasions, though, they can feel somewhat light; you can sense his frustration at the word counts imposed on him by their original publications. Not that everything's necessarily bright and rosy when Stephenson's given the chance to burrow down into a subject. The aforementioned 'Mother Earth, Mother Board', for example, is a somewhat patchy piece of work; some glittering moments, but also far too many data-heavy longueurs that you just want to skip past.

Some may also find the switching formats disconcerting, as the volume shifts from essays and articles to the odd university address and a public online Q&A. True, this is less a concern if you read the book in (relatively) small

bursts rather than from cover to cover. Undoubtedly, though, Stephenson's measured, intelligent authorial voice comes through strongly; the only exception being when he opts to write a foreword to a book by fellow Midwestern author David Foster Wallace in what would appear to be his own approximation of David Foster Wallace. The dissonance between the two authors' styles doesn't quite work, with the reader's attention likely to slip off his sentences with little chance of finding purchase.

Arguably, the book's contents should have been more openly sign-posted; as it is, there are a couple of short stories here, dropped in just when you least expect them. Of the new content, the alleged one sentence opener to a thriller Stephenson suggests he will never complete, "about a serial killer on the loose in the Shire", is nowhere as amusing as his cyber-punked-to-the-max flight of fancy when asked who would win a fight between himself and William Gibson. I genuinely laughed out loud at his "they were only peasants, we did not care" line.

The principal aim of this kind of collection, especially in this internet age, is not so much to preserve an individual author's writing for posterity, but to bring examples of their writing together in such a way to help give an interested reader some impression of the author beyond what might be gleaned from their novels. *Some Remarks* – an accurate enough, if annoyingly self-depreciatory title – certainly leaves you with an impression of the man and the wide spread of his geeky-ness. Whether it is enough to attract new readers to his novels is another matter; all told, it lacks the punch of his earlier book, *In the Beginning... Was the Command Line*. One for completists rather than newbies.



SHAMAN

Kim Stanley Robinson

Orbit hb, 457pp, £18.99

Duncan Lunan

Shaman is neither SF nor fantasy in any of the usual senses. The cover tells us that it's "An awe-inspiring vision of how we lived 30,000 years ago", but the book comes without the explanatory notes which Stephen Baxter has placed at the ends of his Northland trilogy, because there's no alternative history involved. Robinson has set his story on the edge of the ice cap during a glaciation – since there are mammoths, and if the 'Old Ones' with whom his characters share the landscape are Neanderthals, then presumably it's during the glaciation before last, perhaps in the 'Heinrich event' cold snap around 27,000 BC. But there were several of those at 5,000–6,000 year intervals between 21,000 BC and 46,000 BC, accompanied by Neanderthal diebacks. The previous ice age, around 70,000 BC and associated with the eruption of Toba in Sumatra, is probably too far back for Homo sapiens in northwest Europe, if that's the setting; but if Neanderthals survived into the

last Ice Age, as has been suggested, then the date could be as late as the Clovis culture of 11,500 BC in North America, and either coast could be the location. Robinson isn't telling us because his focus is completely on the early adult life of his major character. The book comes with the recommendation "perfect for fans of Iain M. Banks", but if Orbit had decided not to present it as science fiction they could safely have left out the M.

Fantasy elements are equally scarce: the story is told by the "third wind" which visits and boosts Loon the shaman at moments of extreme physical stress, but it's only at those few moments that the narrative shifts into first person and has a paranormal element. Loon's culture views animals as persons, with whom one can have sex and with whose spirits one can converse, but the communication is normally one-way unless hallucinogenic substances are involved.

In short, were Robinson not so well known for the Mars trilogy, *Galileo's Dream* etc, then *Shaman* could well be viewed as a mainstream novel. It is none the worse for that: the landscape, the climate and the cultures are portrayed with the kind of attention to detail that would be needed for survival in those times – arguably the true history of the world over the 200,000 years or so that we've been here, with interglacial warmings like the present one as mere interludes. The plot is one of the oldest there is: young man matures in difficult circumstances, finds girl, loses girl, lands in trouble when he goes looking, but makes it through due to tough teacher who turns out to be good guy. Heinlein could have drafted it, the older John Wayne could have starred in it – it's definitely more *True Grit* than *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*. For a

materialist like me, the interest is in how Robinson plays it out within the detailed visualisation of a world which differs from ours in so many ways.

For an alternative view I showed the book to a more spiritually-minded friend, but her initial comments were about its type size, paragraphing, weight and bulk (it's a big book) – Loon's spiritual development didn't impress her. It's often said that "there would never have been chiefs and witch doctors if people had wanted the witch doctor to be the chief"; but the tribal groups of Loon's world are so small that the shamans and their female counterparts are the joint leaders. What marks Loon out as a future shaman is his artistic talent, the ability to see and pull out the shapes of living creatures latent in wood and rock, and his reluctant evolution as a shaman is traced by the growth of his artistic skills, along with memory training in the narrative songs and the practical skills required to be a leader. Because of his art, which is the one thing he's really good at, there are no other candidates for leader – there is no external contest and the nearest thing to internal conflict is that he's not very good at the memory work. In the struggle to regain his freedom and his wife's from their captors, he matures as a man but his spiritual development is slight.

As a materialist, I'm quite relieved that the action of *Shaman* isn't spaced-out in imagined spiritual realms. Loon triumphs through a gruelling journey across a glacier, not by a shape-shifting contest with the shaman of the ice people. If New Age readers are drawn by the title, expecting spirit journeys of equal length to be portrayed as vividly, they may be dissatisfied or disappointed, but Robinson's message is that to qualify as a leader, it's real-world experience that counts.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

4.

You Don't Have To Be Your Daddy's Batman.

In my last column, I mentioned my desire to widen my horizons and consider how other forms of literature have dealt with the need to re-invent themselves and find new audiences.

However, while this first snapshot is devoted to the world of comics, I am less interested in banging a drum for such brilliant contemporary SF titles as *Saga*, *DMZ*, *The Massive*, *The Nightly News* and *Prophet* than I am in looking at some of the ways in which the mainstream of American comics deals with its huge back catalogue of old ideas.

As with contemporary science fiction, it is possible to trace a direct line between today's superhero comics and the pulps of the 1930s. However, while the SF magazines helped to establish a set of cultural commons that anyone can use to write their own stories, comic publishers hoarded ideas and policed who got to write what and how. Indeed, the structure of the American comics industry could easily have been replicated in SF publishing if only Hugo Gernsback's legendary venality and corruption had been augmented by strategic vision. What if Gernsback had secured exclusive rights to the works of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne?

What if Gernsback had actually paid his writers? Chances are that contemporary SF would be nothing more than officially sanctioned *Time Machine* fan-fiction in much the same way that contemporary superhero comics continue to tell and retell the story of a child who witnessed the murder of his rich socialite parents.

While the tight editorial control exerted by Marvel and DC may ensure that most of their writers are compelled to produce nothing more than disposable fluff, it is clear that characters like Batman and Superman do occasionally undergo radical reinventions. There is not only a clear difference between the bored and drug-addled playboy of Bob Kane's original run on *Detective Comics* and the bare-knuckle corporate brand manager laid down by Grant Morrison in *Batman Incorporated*, there is also a clear sense in which each of these iterations were responding to the times in which they were created. Grant Morrison's wonderfully self-aggrandising critical memoir *Supergods* charts not only how Batman's costume changed, but also how each new re-iteration of the character could be seen as a direct response to the last; the



dark psychotic force of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* could never have existed without the camp and colourful Batman of 1960s TV.

This process of cultural drift is universal. All elements of our culture have a finite lifespan and ideas that one day seem vibrant and relevant inevitably grow hackneyed, decadent and oppressive unless they find a way of renewing themselves and adapting to the times. We see this in the re-invention of Santa Claus just as much as we do in today's preference for historical visions of King Arthur at the expense of the more romantic interpretations of the character found in the work of Thomas Malory. Most cultural artefacts are little more than creative variations on established themes. We are trained to think of the history of our culture as a long, straight road out of the past but human culture is more like a vast Darwinian swamp, teeming with established species and chance mutations that may or may not find their place in a forever changing world. While these universal Darwinian processes may also shape the evolution of comics, the tight editorial and copyright controls applied to superhero characters



means that their re-inventions are significantly less common and much easier to track. The recent history of mainstream comics reads like a playbook of evolutionary strategies intended to adapt 1930s ideas to a 21st Century world.

Every form of popular culture comes with its own form of baggage; failed experiments, outdated successes, abandoned histories and fleeting obsessions continue to inform not only the production of new culture but also its consumption. Different traditions relate to this baggage in different ways. For example, SF people tend to speak of it fondly as a form of inter-generational 'conversation'. Comics fans, on the other hand, refer to their cultural history as 'continuity' and use it as both a barrier to entry and a means of enforcing community values. Indeed, if all iterations of Batman must fit with continuity then authors will have less freedom to write what they want and anyone wanting to join the conversation will be told to do their homework. Though ostensibly different, these two approaches to cultural history are actually two sides of the same coin as non-white, non-male and non-western writers frequently



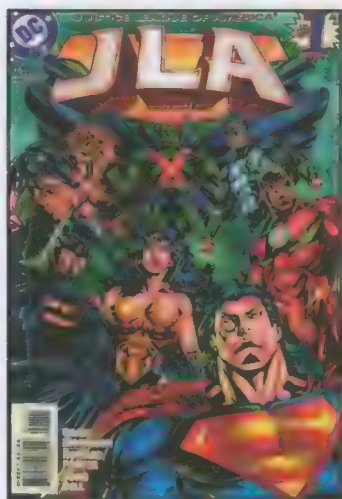
complain of how oppressive and restrictive it is to expect all genre writers to have read the same dead white men. The genre and comic-hating literary critic Harold Bloom referred to the pressure of cultural history as the Anxiety of Influence and explained that creativity comes not from internalising the influence of other writers but setting out to deliberately misinterpret that which came before.

Arguably the most potent misinterpretations of recent comics history are those of Frank Miller and Alan Moore. Troubled by various aspects of their cultural history and yet eager to partake, Miller and Moore set out to confront these problems by subsuming them in a brutal and yet oddly self-conscious form of realism that expressed historic problems as ugly facts about the world. Clearly incensed by the jocular tone and lightweight subject matter of 1960s Batman, Miller's *Dark Knight* shows us precisely what kind of broken and obsessive person would don spandex in an effort to fight crime. Conversely, the far more liberal-minded Moore explores the politics of superheroism by presenting us with first the hideous dystopia and



then the unstable utopia created by generations of concerned but politically naïve vigilantes. While Miller and Moore's attempts to reboot the language of comics and place it on a more ideologically sound footing may be reminiscent of both cyberpunk and feminist SF's attempts to radically rewrite SF's cultural history, most substantial comics published in the last thirty years can be seen as attempts to deal with the legacy of Miller and Moore's artful self-consciousness.

The anxiety of influence confronted by Miller and Moore is the same anxiety that affects contemporary science fiction: How to tell a story when everything has either been said before or said in such a way that it marginalises everyone who is not a white, male baby boomer? As with the genre writings of John Scalzi and James S.A. Corey, some comics writers have responded to the anxiety by simply denying its existence and yearning for a simpler time with simpler politics. A good example of an unapologetically nostalgic comic would be Grant Morrison's *All-Star Superman*, but Alan Moore's self-penned ABC comics including *Tom Strong* and *Promethea* see him struggling to



find a way of turning nostalgia into a creatively fertile sensibility.

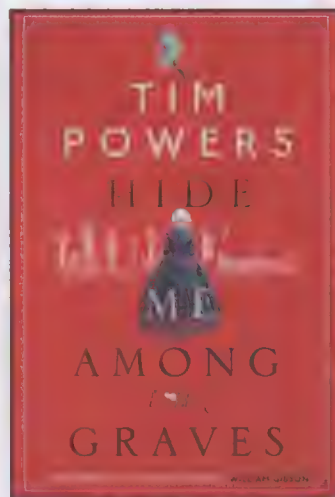
Another interesting attempt at coping with the anxiety of influence is to produce comics that are about comics and thereby transform superheroes into literary critics. While a lot of contemporary comics contain meta-textual elements, Warren Ellis's *Planetary* is an exploration of comics history from their pulpy roots through to the tedium of post-*Watchmen* grimdark. Weird, oblique and almost completely inaccessible to anyone without a decent understanding of comics history, *Planetary* uses the same creative strategy as authors like Adam Roberts and M. John Harrison who apply the techniques of genre writing to the history of science fiction in an effort to ask awkward questions about both the genre's past and its future.

It doesn't take a great critic to look at the current state of the field and realise that the boundaries between genres have been almost entirely dissolved. As Martin Lewis put it in a review at the website *Strange Horizons*, "Quietly, and without any fuss, the New Weird has won." Indeed, like all genre movements, the New Weird was an attempt to overcome

the anxiety of influence and the strategy chosen by the New Weird was to not only embrace the history of SF but the history of fantasy, horror and crime too.

Rather than weighing authors down with yet more expectations, the decision to treat all genres as equally accessible has empowered authors to come to terms with their anxieties and move on with their lives. This mood of free-wheeling postmodernity may fuel the work of such New Weird and post-New Weird writers as China Miéville, Kathe Koja, Mary Gentle and Kameron Hurley but it reaches its logical conclusion in the muscular Dadaism of such Grant Morrison titles as *JLA* and *Batman and Robin*. The most striking thing about these series is that, as with his trippy fantasy thriller series *The Invisibles*, Morrison clearly does not give a fuck about either continuity or consistency as he blows through ideas with little concern about how they might fit together in the reader's head.

Batman and Robin is particularly interesting in this respect as Morrison treats all the inconsistencies of Batman's history as disparate chapters in a single life: Sure Batman spent a number of years living with an under-aged boy and then grew chest hair and got all sexy with femme fatales but that doesn't mean that he has to be either or both of those people now! Manacled to a psychologist's couch and forced to accept and move past all the inconsistencies of his cultural history, Morrison's Batman exudes the manic spiritual energy of a man who, having realised he has nothing left to lose, lives every day as if it were his last, an explosion of creative energy that cleanses as it consumes, thereby begging the question of how long this fucker can burn before all that's left is an oily stain.



HIDE ME AMONG THE GRAVES

Tim Powers

Corvus pb, 511pp, £7.99

Lawrence Osborn

Tim Powers has returned to the world of his 1989 novel *The Stress of Her Regard*. *Hide Me Among the Graves* is largely set in Victorian London between the years 1862 and 1877 and involves two main sets of characters, one fictional and the other historical. The main fictional characters are John Crawford, a veterinary surgeon and the son of one of the protagonists of the earlier novel, and ex-prostitute Adelaide McKee. Their historical counterparts are Christina Rossetti, her siblings and some of their associates.

The book opens with the teenage Christina reawakening the spirit that had possessed her uncle and now resides in a statuette belonging to her father. She later admits this to her sister and together they attempt unsuccessfully to lay the spirit to rest. Thus the scene is set for a complex plot in which the protagonists struggle to rid London of these beings.

Powers has done a masterful job of reinventing the vampire myth with these creatures, which he identifies with the biblical

Nephilim. These 'vampires' have some of the characteristics of the classical *daimon*: they draw on the vitality of their human victims, but in return they endow those victims with remarkable creativity.

As ever, Powers tells a gripping story, weaving the biographies of several historical characters into a romp around the underbelly of Victorian London. I particularly like the way he superimposes a secret supernatural history upon the public history we all know. The creativity of the Rossetti family and their friends and acquaintances as well as the tragedies they suffer are explained in terms of their interaction with the Nephilim. Powers has researched the Rossettis and their context meticulously and uses that research to bring both Victorian London and his secret history to life. I am fascinated by the way he takes apparently trivial details (eg Gabriel Rossetti's pet name for his wife, Trelawny's mysterious mistress Miss B) or carefully selected quotations from Christina and her circle and uses them to reinforce his secret history.

One of the great strengths of his writing is the complexity of his characterisation. Christina is torn between guilt over her teenage indiscretion and genuine love for the entity that once possessed her uncle. Similar points could be made about every one of the central characters. And even the secondary characters Trelawny and Swinburne are lovingly developed.

I confess that I attempted (unsuccessfully) to pick holes in his construct. Perhaps a scholar of the period would have more luck. His attention to detail and his ability to manipulate those details to serve the story he is telling are quite amazing.

This is intelligent, literate supernatural storytelling at its very best, a Gothic novel for the twenty-first century.



THE DIAMOND DEEP

Brenda Cooper

Pyr pb, 450pp, \$18.00

Jim Steel

Book two of Cooper's *Ruby's Song* diptych pretty much carries straight on from *The Creative Fire*. It mirrors its plot-wise in some respects too, starting off as it does with the brutal murder of another one of Ruby's friends. Ruby is, of course, now ensconced in the upper class of this generation starship's stratified society, although her position there is one of tolerance rather than that of power. This, we know, will probably change; not least because the novels are self-consciously modelled on the career of Evita Peron.

The characters are also aware that the centre cannot hold; the ship *The Creative Fire* is fast approaching its home planet and change is coming whether they like it or not. Ruby, as her name suggests, is the jewel at the centre of this story and all the rest of the characters orbit around her in epicycles and ellipses. Even when the viewpoint shifts to others, they are never far from her.

The Creative Fire's civil war is interrupted when another ship

from the home system appears to attack them with robots. Ruby discovers that the spider-like robots are, in fact, post-human beings who are barred from the home world. Only true biological humans are allowed there. The home system has a class structure that makes the one on board *The Creative Fire* seem positively egalitarian. *The Diamond Deep* of the title, for example, is a monstrously-complicated space station with a regime that makes that of the spiders seem humane. Ruby versus diamond. All of the social advances that Ruby made in the first book have apparently been for nothing as she, along with the rest of the ship's company, are now regarded as primitive peasants.

Some of the flaws of the first novel are still present. Cooper isn't breaking any new ground in the setting, and all of her characters are terribly earnest. *The Creative Fire's* AI seems positively nonchalant in comparison to its human passengers. They have none of the dry humour that would be found in the space operas of Lois McMaster Bujold or Iain M. Banks, and this does tend to flatten them somewhat. But Cooper powers through these problems. This volume also benefits from moving outside the confines of *The Creative Fire*. Ruby still has her destiny, and her relationship with Joel, but there are now more paths that these things can take. And Ruby still gets to sing on occasion, although the reader might suspect that she inflicts power ballads on her audience.

It feels as if this universe has been wrung out with these two books and Cooper will be wise if she moves on to something fresh. However, it hasn't outstayed its welcome and that, in itself, is an achievement in this overstuffed field.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

THOR: THE DARK WORLD

ENDER'S GAME

HOW I LIVE NOW

JUSTIN AND THE
KNIGHTS OF VALOUR

ABOUT TIME

CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE
OF MEATBALLS 2

RIDDICK

R.I.P.D.



THOR: THE DARK WORLD

It's hard to remember now that **THOR: THE DARK WORLD** was in quite a lot of trouble at one stage, losing three directors and forcing a reluctant Natalie Portman to honour her contract after penultimate choice Patty Jenkins departed, while the death of original screenwriter Don Payne, a key figure in the rescue of the first film from its very unhappy pre-Branagh versions, saw substitutes hastily bussed in from Marvel's animation arm and the *Captain America* franchise. But Kevin Feige's increasingly assured creative management and the usual uncredited-but-unmistakable script buffing from Joss Whedon ("You must think me a piece of bread that needs to be buttered so heavily") have produced what is not only the most ravishingly Kirbyesque of all Marvel films to date, but one of the most cognitively adventurous explorations of comics cinema's potential to mediate between the discursive longeurs and expodumps of old-media sf and its ADHD-rocking visual cousin.

One day the creative history of the Marvel cinematic universe will be need to be properly written, because the more emerges about the abandoned Matthew Vaughn version of *Thor*, the more Sir Ken

Branagh looks like the unlikely saviour of the Universe. Mark Protosevich's drafts for Vaughn were mediaeval in setting and eschewed sf elements entirely for a literalist reading of the Marvel gods as gods, which would have been wholly disastrous for the *Avengers* cross-franchise; and it seems to have been Branagh who pushed for a strongly science-fictional reading with a present-day setting, Jane Foster, the Casket of Ancient Winters as a terraforming device, and a Hubble-based imaging of Yggdrasil. Even so, the first *Thor* was an understandably nervous proposition, Marvel's first high-stakes expansion of its cinematic universe into the cosmic realms of Jack Kirby's most grandiose imaginings, and it anxiously ballasted its transdimensional spectacle shenanigans with tiresomely cod-Shakespearean familial business to stop it floating too far from the familiar.

But this upbudgeted post-*Avengers* sequel wears its transdimensional threads with something much more like swagger, with a promiscuously portal-hopping, aeon-spanning, world-juggling plot about a war of darkness out of Svartalfheim, and an imaginatively thrilling embrace

of the first film's determinedly science-fictional interpretation of Yggdrasil and the Nine Realms as a Lakoffian cloak of conceptual metaphor wrapped around what Jane Foster correctly parses as a hypocosmic tube-map of wormholes. The final act seems to have been stitched together from two unrelated drafts, beginning as it does with a journey to Mordor starring Thor and Loki as Frodo and Sam and a weaponised Jane as the Ring, and then somehow turned (by a plot point made from a Vimto can, assuredly a mighty Marvel first-and-last) into an inspired transdimensional fisticuffs unleashing the full mad canvas of Kirby's mythosphere as all Nine Worlds simultaneously open dimensional gates to the University of Greenwich. Stellan Skarsgård, having recovered from an early episode at Stonehenge where he "proceeded to strip naked and terrorise tourists with scientific equipment", gives due warning of apocalyptic levels of fun: "increases and decreases in gravity, spatial extrusions – the

whole fabric of reality is going to go berserk!" And indeed Thor boards the tube to find that Greenwich is only three stops from Charing Cross. But Kirbyologists will also enjoy an early cameo by Thor's very first nemesis from *Journey into Mystery* 83, whose essential feature is even belatedly given a point.

If there's any feeling of letdown, it's that the ingredients feel a bit undercooked and the best concepts – the assault on Asgard, busting Loki out of clink, the who's-backstabbling-who plot trapdoors, the climactic portal-dash punchup around the enneacosm – wind up serving another of those placeholder plots about excavating a cosmic-WMD MacGuffin ("Bury it deep where no-one will ever find it", unless Natalie Portman happens to be ambling around the Nine Realms and finds it in plain view) and closing the villain's apocalyptic holes in the sky before any more tourist landmarks are digitally trashed. But it's still a game-raiser for Marvel Studios' escape

from the earthbound routine of supersoldiery and SHIELD ops to the wild outer realms of the comics imagination, and confirms the Thor films as the real engine of the MCU. All Kirby's daring and conceptual overreach has been channelled into this node of the Marvel cinematic world-tree, to be processed and redistributed to the outlying franchise realms. But make no mistake: Asgard rules over all.

Newly busted out of development Helheim is **ENDER'S GAME**: a risky attempt by South African director Gavin Hood, who made his international name as a literary writer-director of screen versions of novels by Sienkewicz and Fugard, to get back into his own master game following an unlikely tour of duty in the Foxheim branch of Marvel's Yggdrasil with the unhappily received *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. The adaptation of Orson Scott Card's iconic novel must have looked like something of a poisoned chalice, having been let go by Warners after

ENDER'S GAME



years of developmental tinkering including a script stint by Card himself, and re-emerging now as an independent production. The most serious attempt before Hood's was David Benioff's 2004 version for Wolfgang Petersen, but even they were ultimately unable to crack the novel's multiple layers of Hollywood-proofing in its cast of six-year-olds, its surrogate antagonists for an offscreen nemesis barely glimpsed, its climax which turns out to have already happened when you get there, and its final rug-pull decisively undercutting all the preceding narrative simplicities to propel the character and his sequels into a different, finer, and very much stranger kind of sf altogether.

Nobody involved seems to want to speak warmly for the author, whose own strident hostility to buggers (the film goes with his later substitute "Formics") triggered a boycott call to which the filmmakers have offered the backhanded reassurance that Card was locked out of the building and stiffed of a share in the profits. But those who've grown up with the Enderverse have long since made their personal peace with the fact that Card's assorted LDS trippinesses are the source of his best work's complexity and strangeness, and certainly baked far too deep into his fiction to be merely shrugged away in embarrassment. In recent years *Ender's Game* has found itself normalised and conceptually sanitised by being claimed for the young-adult canon, a classification that safely taxonomises away most of the things that make it such an extraordinary book. While the classification isn't entirely unwarranted, given that it's about the core YA genre theme of kids being lied to by adults, it's in important respects the very opposite of a



HOW I LIVE NOW

teen novel, and not just because its point resides precisely in its hero's not being a teen. Far more richly and importantly, it's an artfully deconstructed Heinlein juvenile in which exhilarating space-cadet games of soldier are framed and undermined by a dark adult narrative about the real implications of weaponising child soldiers into instruments of species-killing mass destruction, and which modulates boldly at the end into the first of Card's resonant sf palimpsests of Mormon myth, as Ender the xenocide becomes an interplanetary avatar of Joseph Smith, American Moses (apologies for the earworm) and blasts off to the stars on his mission of speaking for the dead.

For the most part, Hood's adaptation is an exhilarating swerve-ride of carcrashes narrowly averted. Ender is aged up to twelve and played by a fifteen-year-old, but Asa Butterfield turns out to carry the role quite beautifully, even if everyone else is pretty woeful – particularly Harrison Ford, whose Hyrum Graff seems to have misheard his character's name as a casting note. A few unworkable elements have been sensibly ditched, particularly those involving superblogger

sibling Peter Wiggin (who simply drops from sight); but some extraordinary things are retained, including Ender's truly bizarre tablet game and the full-on revelation ending, which has if anything been more heavily Mormonised than the book version. Character timelines are tweaked to make Dragon Army mostly agemates and nod gently to sidequel *Ender's Shadow*, but the only major change is the elimination of the protracted space travel and associated effects of relativistic ageing which underpin Mazer Rackham's presence in this volume and the numerous baroque time-dilation effects that enliven the sequels as the characters' relative ages desynchronise. The climax now takes place not on Eros but in the Formic home system, which doesn't make a lot of physical sense but allows Butterfield himself to play the ending, and even to tease with the option of further instalments, which he could equally well play now or in fifty years' time if the audience is still there.

Another iteration of the YA war-novel adaptation comes in Kevin Macdonald's **HOW I LIVE NOW**, from Meg Rosoff's feisty

fable of a life-bruised American fifteen-year-old transplanted to England on the eve of WW3, and her *Cold Mountain* odyssey to reunite her scattered cousins. Though presented initially as a romance, the story's real heart is the heroine's relationship with the eight-year-old girl cousin with whom she escapes on her perilous homeward trek. But if *Ender's Game* is an adult story remade as a YA film, *How I Live Now* makes daringly few concessions to the novel's original audience and fanbase, to the point where one seriously wonders why they bothered. It's not that the actual storyline significantly deviates – though there's a *Troy*-style shock when one of the best-loved characters, who survives the book largely unscathed, is peremptorily and nastily dispatched for no reason any fan of the book could ever endorse, while the book's enthusiastic underage incest is unavoidably toned down, with the heroine and her cousin aged up to legality and only getting it briefly on after the apocalypse has already broken out. But the whole tone of the film is so wilfully different from its source as to miss precisely what makes the novel sing: the sassy, indomitable voice of its

protagonist, whose sparky teenage wit and newly-tapped capacity for love become her keys to survival in an adult world that has grimly lost the plot. Saoirse Ronan is as fine as you'd expect in her reconceived version of the role, but without her character's defining humour and warmth (and without her companion's supplementary powers of superadorability and sheepdog-trialling), the narrative becomes little more than a protracted post-apocalyptic trudging picture, and stacks up particularly poorly against 2009's similarly-themed, but little-seen, Australian invasion fantasy *Tomorrow, When the War Began*.

The terrifyingly ubiquitous Ronan resurfaces yet again (making four films in three issues) in Spanish chevalpunk animation **JUSTIN AND THE KNIGHTS OF VALOUR**, which has put a lot of work into its English dub by way of punching up the dialogue and recruiting the cream of Anglo-Celtic voice talent to add international value to a fairly unprepossessing Euro-dud property. Ronan's secret, which so far only Wes Anderson seems to have clocked, is that her accent wizardry is a professional cover

for the fact that her native County Carlow lilt, which is every bit as lovely as Chris Hemsworth's golden bass, is an instrument tuned for comedy. Luckily in animation nobody knows you're a pale blonde waif with a portfolio of solemn dramatic roles, so she's able here to voice a busty warrior barmaid in hot leather britches who more than holds her own against the similarly native-accented Freddie Highmore and James Cosmo. The actual plot is a bafflingly dense Euro-twist on *The Sword in the Stone* in which knightliness has been forbidden under bureaucratic legislation, and ginger wannabe Justin has to undergo an exhausting programme of training montages to fulfil his dream of donning the iron suit and honouring his ancestors' memory in defiance of his father's legal nannying. ("Those rules make all of us equal and help us to live with each other." – "Well, maybe justice and the law aren't always the same thing.") A convoluted extended-family Europlot is mapped out in a bewildering juggle of swords as tokens of filiation: "You clung to your grandfather's sword until the end, but now it has returned to me and I will use it to kill your

JUSTIN AND THE KNIGHTS OF VALOUR





ABOUT TIME

father!" But audiences schooled to the unforgiving narrative beat of Pixar, DreamWorks, Fox and Sony animation, who storyboard this stuff till it bleeds, are likely to find the pace, plot, and gags arrhythmic and stumbling.

Justin's familial themes of extended masculinity are echoed in Richard Curtis's professed directorial swansong **ABOUT TIME**: a muddled sf twist on his master plot of cringeing British males wooing adorably underwritten American leading ladies, as Domhnall Gleeson learns on his 21st that the familial Y chromosome carries a *Time Traveller's Wife* gene allowing males to timeslip backwards along their lifeline by a version of the genteel J.W. Dunne method variously favoured by J.B. Priestley and Richard Matheson, but with the videogame-era bonus of unlimited iterability. So Gleeson starts by creepily stalk-courting Rachel McAdams (in extreme romcom mode as a bashful, stumbly version dowed-down with a dodgy frock and mousy fringe, yet still completely out of his league), before the film loses interest in her and gear-crashes into a midlife meditation on generationality, with the focus shifting to the hero's relationship with father, sister, and children, and Bill Nighy coming to the fore as the patriarch heading for the exit. It's an interesting attempt to

extend the narrative boundaries of romcom into its real-life multigenerational sequel of middle age, parenthood, and the mortality of grandparents, but the handling of its premise is offensive on multiple levels. Time-travel plotting has a deserved reputation among experienced screenwriters as the hardest thing to do well, and Curtis seems to have succumbed to a particular kind of magical thinking among very bad screenwriters that audiences can be entertained out of their rational minds and distracted by all the fun they're having from asking the questions anyone would normally ask about the basic coherence and consistency of the rules. Worse still, the film seems entirely unaware of the cumulative effect of its refusal to allow any female characters to don the time trousers, which reduces women to subjectivity-free objects of godlike manipulation by feckless narcissistic males. It's no excuse

that all other films do the same. There's more unfinished family business in **CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS 2**, which gives the prolific animation team of Phil Lord and Chris Miller the unenviable mission of finding something worth sequeilling in their breakout 2009 feature about a machine for turning weather into processed comestibles, but sees them rise rather handsomely to the brief with a sustained and quite mad food-themed homage to *Jurassic Park* and *Avatar*. Eight minutes after the first film ends, inventor Flint Lockwood and his misfit crew are evacuated off their mid-Atlantic island for a UN cleanup operation under Flint's childhood scientist hero, only to find six months on that the island has evolved its own complex ecosystem of brightly-coloured lifeforms based on laboured visual and verbal foodimal puns (shrimpanzees, watermelonphants, hippotatoes, susheep, tacodiles, subwhales... it was evidently a long brainstorming weekend). As Flint and his crew go in on a mission to locate his genesis device and shut down the system, they find themselves questioning their objectives and the agenda of their handlers, leading to a thrilling finale where the island unites to stage a gigantic fruit-led parody of the assault on Pandora. There's some light interrogation of the food industry's motives

CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS 2





RIDDICK

and commercially-led denialism over ecology and climate science ("Meteorology: the science of smiling and looking pretty while pointing at a screen"), but the random-walk zigzags of plotting quickly lose sight of where any of it was going, and it quickly becomes a display of cinema eating its own regurgitate and pooping it straight back into its own processing tract like an autoerotic human centipede with the squitters. But by the time you've seen James Caan singing a sea shanty about sardinivorous gherkins and a kawai-eyed sentient strawberry fighting in a James Cameron exosuit, nothing cinema can ever do again will seem strange.

More welcome but less happy sequel **RIDDICK** brings David Twohy and Vin Diesel's epic badass back to the screen nine years after the audacious but commercially disastrous attempt to scale up their franchise into big-budget space opera in 2004's *Chronicles of Riddick*. Even after Diesel leveraged the rights to Riddick with his *Fast and Furious* deal, it's been a haul to get this back-to-basics relaunch off the ground, with a greatly reduced budget that doesn't play at all well on the IMAX screens to which it's been curiously released. Twohy himself has marked the time between instalments

with his worst film (Darren Aronofsky's haunted-submarine handmedown *Below*) and his best (2009's impossible-twist trick thriller *A Perfect Getaway*), and *Riddick* stands somewhere in the middle: by no means a disaster, but a significant disappointment for those who actually liked the direction in which *Chronicles* was taking the franchise, and a letdown even as a more-of-the-same followup to *Pitch Black* (which it traces over closely, with Riddick now spacewrecked with two shiploads of bounty-hunters on a world of digital nasties that come out in the rain). There's some truly nasty sexual banter from the hero, though admittedly at Katee Sackhoff, who can rise above it better than most; and the film is best seen as a placeholder to keep the franchise open for more ambitious things to come. Let's hope.

Redeeming features are thin on the ground in megaflop **R.I.P.D.**, from Peter Lenkov's comic series about a cop killed on the job who finds himself inducted into the afterlife's law-enforcement division to deliver eschatological justice to "deadoes": the damnation-dodging fugitives from the criminal underworld who hide among us in mortal disguise and betray their presence with "broken shit". It is, of course, a straight clone of *Men in Black*, but then so was the comic – whose plotline is loosely but not unrecognisably adapted here with a bit more attention to Hollywood values of moral payback, emotional closure, and third-act spectacle, with the obligatory wormhole-in-the-sky finale here rather nicely conceived as a prison break from Hell seeking to tunnel into Heaven. But Ryan Reynolds is at his blandest in the Will Smith role, and Jeff Bridges reminds us that he was once capable of absolutely terrible performances, and has never entirely lost the skill. It may be that he's simply trying too hard not to be Tommy Lee Jones, which is unfortunately how his character is written (though it's actually quite faithful to the comic). Five years ago, it might still have seemed quite an acceptable tentpole formula; but it has the misfortune to arrive in a season where the top end of comics cinema is raising the game out of reach.

R.I.P.D.



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

IKARIE XB-1

LIFEFORCE

GRIMM SEASON TWO

DR MABUSE, THE GAMBLER

MY AMITYVILLE HORROR

THE NIGHT OF THE
HUNTER

PACIFIC RIM

UNDER THE DOME



Made in 1963, **IKARIE XB-1** (DVD, 23 September) is a Czech adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's Polish novel *The Magellanic Cloud* (1955). The edited English-dubbed version, with a different ending, was released as *Voyage to the End of the Universe*, and it's been a significant influence upon media SF, from *Star Trek* and *Dark Star*, to *Solaris* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

I remember that when I first saw this (in its US cut), I wished more than ever before that Hollywood had filmed one of my favourite SF books, A.E. van Vogt's *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950). Although the final destination of pioneering starship *Ikarie* is Alpha Centauri, and its lengthy voyage is hardly half as eventful or cosmically imaginative as that of the *Space Beagle*, the speculative plot of Jindřich Polák's film – apparently inspired by the USSR's early successes in the space race – embodied similarly intelligent SF traditions with a classic appeal. Impressive in its lavish sets and a colonisation-strength mixed crew instead of just basic star-flight resources for a quick study and return home, the *Ikarie* project attempts to fulfil all of the grandest pulp dreams of interstellar travel in a spacious and extravagant manner, despite being shot in



b&w several years after the colourful *Forbidden Planet*. Although *Ikarie* does not possess the timeless qualities of *Forbidden Planet* or *2001*, the sense of otherness that is generated by its European origins mean that, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, it remains a refreshing change of pace in contrast to the latest essentially derivative nonsense such as *Star Trek Into Darkness*. *Ikarie*'s intriguing tale is told in flashback. An irradiated survivor, homesick antihero Michal, succumbs to madness during this expeditionary scenario where the unknown of deep space makes for a formidable antagonist. The comedy relief robot 'Patrick' is obviously based on *Forbidden Planet*'s iconic utility 'Robby', but Patrick's frustrating ineffectiveness in crises anticipates humorous scenes in TV series *Lost in Space* and *Star Wars*. The discovery of a derelict habitat (lost in the 20th century!) strewn with corpses pre-dates the horrors of *Event Horizon*. An encounter with a mysterious and seemingly malevolent 'dark star' can be seen as the weird sci-fi precursor to Disney's campy delirium in *The Black Hole*. Swiss feature *Cargo* (*Interzone* #229) is, perhaps, the 21st century's heir to *Ikarie*'s ambitions as mysterious and spectacular SF drama.



If you find this interesting, note that three other east European productions – *Silent Star* (aka *First Spaceship on Venus*, 1960), *Eolomea* (1972) and *In the Dust of Stars* (1976), all released in the region 1 DVD box set *DEFA Sci-Fi Collection* – are also genuinely fascinating works in the serious space opera mode, and worthwhile viewing (and good fun!) for any keen fans of retro-futurism in adventure movies that strive to overcome the subgenre's limitations of cowboy styled/militaristic heroics in spacesuits.

"She killed all my friends, and I still didn't want to leave. Leaving her was the hardest thing I ever did." Having long since won cult status it is not a surprise to see **LIFEFORCE** (Blu-ray, 14 October) get a well-deserved re-mastering for this HD presentation. Despite, or perhaps because of, its hokey dialogue, often rampant sexism, underwritten characters and quite hammy/tongue-in-cheek performances, Tobe Hooper's BritisHollywood SF horror is one of the most peculiarly dysfunctional yet still very enjoyable genre movies of the mid-1980s.

The NERVA-engined shuttle *Churchill* launches for a rendezvous with a gigantic alien ark



in the head of Halley's Comet. Finding perfect 'human' bodies sealed in crystallised-energy capsules, the crew forget the Greek myth lessons of the Trojan horse and the sirens and are doomed. Only one love-struck astronaut (Steve Railsback) returns to Earth, with a psychic bond to his star goddess (ballerina Mathilda May), whose constant nudity carries more visual impact than most of John Dykstra's spacecraft/optical effects. Peter Firth portrays an SAS colonel who runs about frantically shooting zombies, before he finally helps the spaced-out spacer hero to save the world from the naked space girl and her vampiric invasion force. If nothing else, *Lifeforce* can be seen as the likely inspiration a decade later for the *Species* franchise.

The director is not known for subtlety, especially when exploring the sensationalist approach to modern gothic tales, punctuated by *Poltergeist*-like disturbances and regular explosions as we find here. The epic scale of *Lifeforce* may not be as very well realised as big screen narrative, but this hysterically toned adaptation of Colin Wilson's novel comes from the same pulp genre influences as *Alien* and *Quatermass*, and there can be no doubt about the appeal-



ing spectacle of urban melee that heralds the widespread violent destruction of a vaguely spiritual apocalypse centred on London.

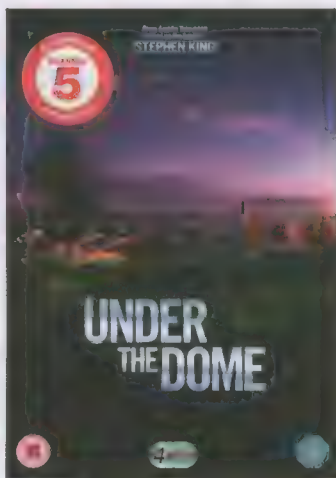
This two-disc release has the (preferred) international version (116 minutes) and the rather more clumsily-paced theatrical cut (101 minutes). *Cannon Fodder* (70 minutes) is a worthwhile making-of featurette and this showcase package also includes brief but new interviews with the director and his top stars Railsback and May.

Much better TV entertainment than *True Blood*, where intrigues frequently give way to soapy interludes, or *Once Upon a Time* which often lapses into sentimentality, **GRIMM SEASON TWO** (Blu-ray/DVD, 21 October) is a police drama with genre themes spanning fantasy, sci-fi and horror. Some reality-blurring gags ("Dahmer was a wendigo?") suggest *X-Files* riffs, and, when hero Nick and his detective partner share heirloom-library research duties – and so keep discovering that practically everyone in their Portland, Oregon crime beat has a secret/inner animal/spirit form – *Grimm* rivals *Supernatural*. An international conspiracy that began with crusader knights has led to seven royal families all bat-



ting to acquire 'keys' to global domination. When secret knowledge changes what people are, not just what manner of magic they might believe in, then philosophical questions about identity come under close examination.

A stern-faced guest star, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio excels playing Nick's long-lost mother. Some inherited traits of the Wesen are like superpowers, others may be just socially embarrassing. Captain Renard suffers transformation anxiety/agonies while assuming a new princely stalker role. Nick's poisoned girlfriend Juliette (Bitsie Tulloch) wakes from her coma but she's afflicted with a temporary amnesia resulting in an uncanny romantic triangle. Suicide, bloody murders, cairn burial, obsessive behaviours, solutions to intractable problems found in the witchcraft shop, and a distancing-from-reality affect of anything-goes endearing weirdness that stems from emergent synthetic folklore, means that *Grimm* is spiced and spiced with noirish allusions. It's a cross-genre scenario that blurs darker fantasy and underworld concerns like a 21st century take on Val Lewton's mystery classics. As a grown-up variant of the Scooby gang, Nick and his super-friends confront



versions of creepy creature stereotypes: charmless snake-men, red-neck werewolves, wild cat-people or assorted rodentoids. There's witty satire found in congregations of sheep following a 'reformed' wolf-man playing reverend. Other cynical jibes against the church suggest corruption and persecution of Wesen types over centuries, if not millennia.

Grimm depicts various closet critters. Some are hairy, often fanged and dangerous; others are furry, snouty, and less menacing or borderline docile. Genetic freaks/mutant maniacs include a non-Brundle fly-guy who blinds his victims, daylight ghosts, gypsy witches, a pheromonal hypnotist who needs a lesson in Wesen style rough justice, mortuary re-animations by voodoo barony, Rumpelstiltskin as a nameless gamer, the Roman 'god' of fire, the ultimate fetching waif as an irresistible muse-elf, and – perhaps almost inevitably, considering this programme's sophisticated criminality – a truly Machiavellian blonde. "Maybe we got lucky this time and we're just dealing with a normal human psychopath." Throughout all of this, the hero is primarily an investigator and sometimes a judge, but not just a slayer. However, Nick resorts

increasingly to vigilantism ("But at least we know who did it!") against crooked or feral Wesen, so he upsets foreign agendas and inadvertently provokes diabolical responses from his most clandestine enemies. The best of breed episode, *Endangered*, concerning glowing blue humanoids, cleverly blends together UFOlogy in-jokes with a post-nuclear family extinction crisis. Although its policier structure distinguishes *Grimm* from Damian Kindler's sci-fi *Sanctuary*, there are obvious similarities with regard to crypto-zoological fabulation, so fans of that may well enjoy this.

Fritz Lang's silent classic **DR MABUSE, THE GAMBLER** scores highly with its new transfer (Blu-ray, 28 October), fully restored to a well-deserved glory. In a four-hour Berlin story told formally in two chapters and several acts, this crime spree begins with a stolen trade contract and a stock exchange meltdown amidst rumblings of economic disaster, before switching lines to a psychoanalysis lecture, and an introduction for Cara, a dancer on stage between giant phallic noses. Burlesque comedy presents her as one of the cinema's earliest femme fatales, but even she is distraught at Dr Mabuse's activities as mad genius of the underworld: "You gamble with money, with people, with destinies...and, most harrowingly, with yourself!"

This concerns nothing less than the arrival of the super-villain. He is one who swindles the rich, to incite paranoia in a poker player facing ruin; but Mabuse is far more than just a mysterious con-man at the card tables, he is the great conductor of insidious evil in a contemporary world without saints. As a screen presence, Dr Mabuse frequently implies that modernity is a threat of conspiracies, especially in decadent circles.

He's a kidnapper, a murderer, a master of disguise in the adventures of a sneaky bastard. He's a pulp fiction Übermensch with a most fragile sanity.

There are many pioneering compositions of acting or dazzling action scenes against impressive background artistry, but the plot unfolds at a sluggish pace. Precision is nevertheless vital to this meandering storyline, where details are hacked out by clocks and maps and newspaper cuttings and handwritten notes. Detective work, in this frustrating pursuit of an elusive menace to sense and society ensures that many themes of audacious terrorism, originated in Lang's taboo-breaking *Mabuse* pictures, may be traced throughout decades of ambiguously dystopian cinema. See *SPECTRE* in the 007 series, and in American film noir (Lang's own *The Big Heat* for example), and also comic book crime kingpins (reconsider Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* as a kind of *Mabuse* fan-fic opus), right up to the present, where the profound influence of this fascinatingly innovative and franchised saga remains noticeable in Hollywood movies as varied in tone or style or genre content as *Iron Man 3* and *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Occasionally, English subtitles are hard to read at first glance, when text overlaps that of German inter-titles. As with sequel *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (*Interzone* #243), this HD release includes another exceptional scholarly commentary by the entertaining David Kalat, who champions the novelist Norbert Jacques as *Mabuse's* (co-)creator.

Eric Walter's feature **MY AMITYVILLE HORROR** (DVD, 28 October) is another pseudocumentary, so if like me you are so thoroughly disillusioned with this exhausted screen format that watching just one more feels like

an interrogation by the infamous dentist named Szell, then don't bother with it. Instead, turn to Charles Laughton's horribly dated but frequently mesmerising **THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER** (Blu-ray, 28 October). Although I think it is hugely overvalued, and possesses little overtly genre content bar a superfluous 'magical' style, there is little doubt that *The Night of the Hunter* is a vague fairy tale filmed with unforgettable images. I am not a fan of star Robert Mitchum. I don't actually dislike him, but I've always felt he seems to be held in a far higher esteem by critics and cineastes than his unsubtle performances deserve. American crime melodrama collides with a kitchen-sink family dilemma as vainglorious ex-convict/'preacher' Harry marries a widow (Shelley Winters) and bullies her children, while he tries to discover where his former prison cellmate (Peter Graves!) stashed the cash from a robbery. Overbearing religious speeches dripping with false sentiment and unconvincing acting by stereotyped orphans means this 1955 'cult classic' (a term misapplied to this, I'd say) depends too heavily on its imaginative cinematography by Stanley Cortez.

For mad preacher movies, I much prefer the urban varieties of *Wise Blood* and *Crimes of Passion*, while character- and performance-wise it is Daniel Day-Lewis as Plainview in *There Will Be Blood* who wipes the floor with Mitchum's weaker efforts here. In the end, watching Laughton's first and only directorial work again, so many years after I saw it on TV, reminds me how much of a struggle it was (and still is) to get through 90 minutes. Fabulous pictures! But it's a shame about the story, which feels mediocre.

For decades after first watching my favourite Toho kaiju movie,

Destroy All Monsters (1968), I wondered what a blockbuster version with Hollywood special effects would look like. I enjoyed the US remake of *Godzilla* (*Interzone* #226), but nowadays it only whets the appetite for greater creature-feature mayhem. Can the latest CGI standards generate anticipatory excitement for the ultimate monsterama – like *Robot Jox* versus Lovecraftian beasts – bringing recent 3D anime where giant mecha fight big aliens to life?

While the different perspectives of British picture *Monsters* and very American game-derivative *Battleship* examined (somewhat blindly) the big feet and head of an imagined movie-elephant, **PACIFIC RIM** (Blu-ray/DVD, 11 November), as directed by genre genius Guillermo del Toro, is a valiant attempt to depict the whole animal in its native cinematic habitat of comic book colour and spectacular action. A winningly off-beat combination of *Independence Day* pulp sci-fi heroics and weird science, wearing the fanboy credentials of its 50th anniversary Harryhausen-tribute on its sleeve. With tongue-in-cheek appeal, *Pacific Rim* focuses upon *Top Gun* styled pilots of the Jaeger machines as its warrior elite, unlike *Iron Man 3* where the unacknowledged true hero is Jarvis – surely the most undervalued AI of recent years, despite orchestrating battle systems in that busy movie's combat scenes.

The various alien behemoths are amusingly reminiscent of many other designs from creature movies. Whether in coastal defence or pre-emptive nuclear strike mode the smack-down encounters between Jaegers and kaiju are vividly depicted without a hint of the crazily edited havoc popularised by *Transformers* and its sequels. And yet, del Toro's epic skates happily over the highly implausible, and completely ignores the

physically impossible (even eight huge Chinook helicopters would be unable to airlift such massive robots!). When the action is this much fun, it's easy to overlook the bad SF content and accept *Pacific Rim* as a gloriously irreverent exercise in fantasy. Just set aside your cynicism for 130 minutes and revel in the harmless nightmare of it all!

Based on a novel by Stephen King, *Lost* alumni Brian K. Vaughan's TV series **UNDER THE DOME** (DVD, 18 November) concerns Chester's Mill (yes, Grover's Mill, natch), a small town so ordinary that each resident is a stereotype, and even some travellers just passing through are recognisable strangers. From a clear sky, a seemingly impenetrable barrier drops over the area. One split cow, damaged buildings, wrecked vehicles, a light-plane crash, and a house-fire later, the pressures of isolation begin to dismantle what fragile integrity remains in a trapped rural community where limited-authority figures (councilman, reverend, sheriff) are wholly corrupt or planning to be.

The mysterious force-field recalls Alan Bridges' hospital siege *Invasion* (1966), but there are few signs of humanoid aliens here. While most of the frightened/angry 'millers simply pull together, led by 'Big Jim' (Dean Norris), a few tackle investigative or adversarial roles. A teenage psycho, a crazy gunman and a redneck manhunt add to various logic problems falling upon the shoulders of deputy sheriff Linda (Natalie Martinez, *Death Race*), feisty local reporter Julia (Rachelle Lefevre, *The Caller*), and war veteran/initially unsuspected murderer 'Barbie' (Mike Vogel, *Cloverfield*). Clues to solving the mystery include young seizure-sufferers chanting "pink stars are falling in lines". The dome appears slightly porous to air and water,

and it shields a functioning micro-climate, but blocks out sound and radio signals. A strange viral outbreak and a batch of other jeopardy twists dramatise a collapse of morality in this societal crucible while discovering the fates of MIA or AWOL folk seems low priority, designed simply to stretch narrative tension over multiple episodes and prolong the misery of victims affected by criminal behaviour taking advantage of the crisis, or the patients afflicted by symptoms of possession. It's a risky bet which will run out first, the clean water or the goodwill.

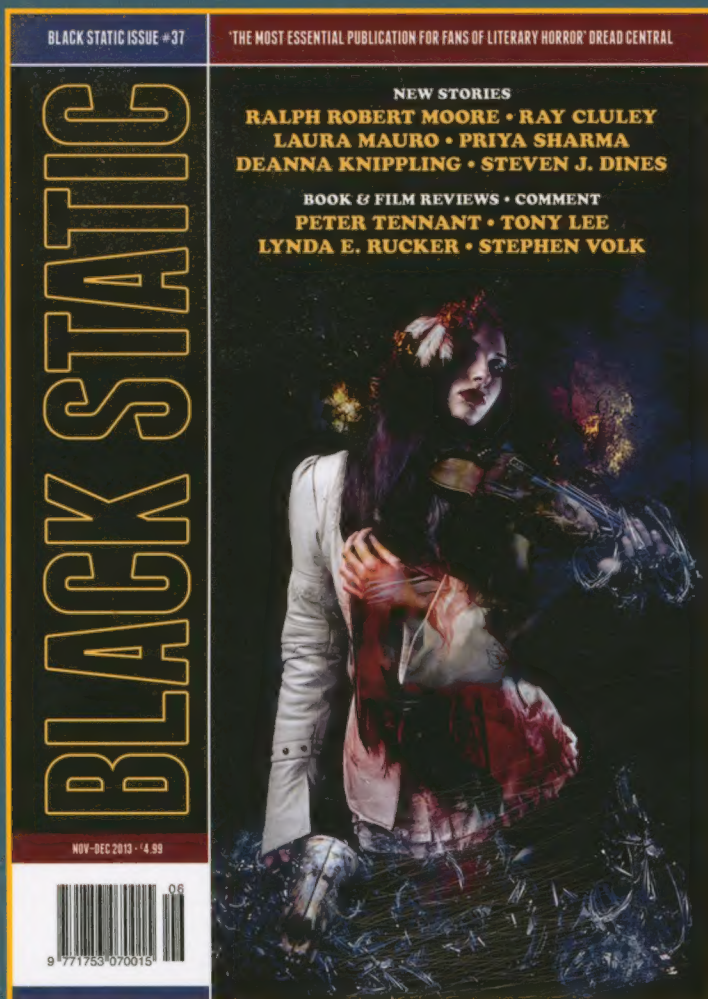
Brooding stories of new realities that arise from inexplicable paradigm shifts – such as *Lost*, *Jericho*, *The Happening*, *Torchwood*, *Miracle Day*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* remake, Eric Kripke's *Revolution*, and King's own *Dreamcatcher*, etc – can be interpreted as evidence that screen/TV writers have run out of really interesting/fresh ideas. Or are they all – somewhat clumsily in a 'disaster soap' mode – attempts to explore the SF concept of a Singularity (best depicted on TV, so far, in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*)? It seems most likely that such pseudo-profound media fictions are also a means of addressing, if not often dealing with, some of the bewildering sociopolitical/cultural fallout of 11th September 2001. "Maybe the dome's a cocoon" or perhaps it is heaven-sent damnation upon the wicked (like a certain biblical city). Common beliefs (including UFOlogy and *X-Files* style government conspiracies) are being tested here, either way.

Chester's Mill is certainly not the Village, as in *The Prisoner* or its remake. It's nothing much like the weird fun of *Twin Peaks* either. It is, however, a vague critique of blinkered capitalism and the ignorant folksy mentalities of heartland America. The WMD prep for the 'millers final day proves a

premature climax (of course), but then a subsequent dead landscape beyond their shelter is apocalypse-now enough to prompt the killing of the lead religious nutter (often a cheerful turning point in King's escape-proof hells, as seen in *The Mist*). Leon Rippy (*Saving Grace*) is great in a support role as belligerent farmer Ollie, who briefly gains a stranglehold on the essential supplies in order to counteract the greedy Big Jim's control-freak ambitions. Ollie also gets in the way of any chance for a favourable outcome in the show's numbingly predictable father-and-son reconciliation chapter. When young love blooms and the kids find the faerie/alien egg (yay, Kinder surprise!) buried in the woods, hallucinatory messages begin: "The monarch will be crowned." Too many plot twists are of the usually boring (a conspiracy linked to drugs) or eye-rolling kind (the dead sheriff kept secrets under his hat!), not jaw-dropping. Repeatedly, *UTD* shows how, according to the feel-better fantasy aspects of King's lore, typically immature adults can sometimes be dangerous without any smart adolescent supervision, more so when the eager kids demo latent/blatant psi abilities. The genre material is largely concerned with getting four 'hands' together: psycho son, kidnapped girl, nerd boy, and the daughter of a lesbian couple. "We're like the guardians of some secret cosmic mystery. It's too much" deadpans lonely Norrie, rejecting her Midwich-cousin role in this possibly unsolvable puzzler. She also quotes Edmund Burke on "the triumph of evil". Do kids do that, like, ever?

As the season finale's big blackout looms, can the 'millers avoid their path to a wilful self-destruction, or will the anticipated cliff-hanger ending be a bit silly? Quick, turn on your TV...the world's about to end!

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